# RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW ON HARASSMENT AND CENSORSHIP

**March 2023**

*More in Common*

# Overview

**Purpose of the review**

More in Common was appointed to conduct a rapid evidence review on harassment and censorship by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the Government's Independent Advisor for Social Cohesion, Dame Sara Khan, as part of her Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience.

The request for this review was prompted by reports of instances of harassment and intimidation online and offline, directed at those in public life (politicians, academics, and activists), the wider public, and those from protected characteristic groups.

The scope was to evaluate whether the available data in academic and grey literature[1] demonstrated any trends and themes on the scale and direction of harassment and intimidation, but also the consequences of that harassment, in particular as it pertains to censorship and self-censorship.

As part of More in Common's Rapid Evidence Review on Harassment and Censorship in the UK, we convened a roundtable of experts and practitioners to present a synthesis of our evidence and gain insights and feedback into our review on the scale of harassment and censorship in the UK, its impact on our democracy and social cohesion, and what can work effectively to tackle harassment and censorship in the UK today. This roundtable was held under Chatham House rules and included a variety of experts from a range of contexts from universities and schools to activist groups, elected representatives, civil servants, and charity leaders.

This work has been funded by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), as part of budget allocated for Dame Sara Khan's Independent Review of Social Cohesion and Resilience'.

**Review questions**

This rapid evidence review was question-led, focusing on five questions proposed by More in Common and refined in conjunction with the Office of the Independent Advisor on Social Cohesion. The five review questions are:

- *Measuring the scale of harassment and self-censorship in the UK – by how much, if at all, is it increasing? Under what conditions, if any, is it leading to self-censorship?*
- *What groups in particular are more affected by harassment and self-censorship (e.g., women, minority communities, socially conservative voices)?*
- *What impact is this change in levels of harassment having on rights, freedoms, democracy, social cohesion, and pluralism?*
- *What works in effectively countering harassment and why?*
- *How do we better clarify the distinction between protected speech and threatening speech?*

**The challenge of defining harassment and censorship**

Our approach to the research and analysis was to use broad conceptions of harassment and censorship rather than narrow or highly technical definitions. For the purposes of this report, we define harassment subjectively (by building on the government's definition in the context of workplace bullying) as behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated or offended[2], that can occur online or offline, and is illegal in some instances. The main focus of this review was harassment of a personal or targeted nature (e.g., targeting people's jobs or threatening their livelihoods). In our expert roundtable discussion, several participants raised concerns about the inclusion of 'offence' in the government's working definition of workplace harassment and bullying – and potential freedom of speech implications for a broad subjective definition which includes offence.

We explored harassment experienced across the population, and not just among protected characteristics groups. We chose an approach to harassment which considers subjective experiences of harassment rather

[1] For the purposes of this review, grey literature includes reports and policy papers, newsletters, blogs, official documents, speeches, white papers from a range of government bodies and non-governmental organisations. Most of this grey literature has not been peer-reviewed.

[2] Workplace bullying and harassment, GOV.UK

than harassment which passes objective reasonableness tests, as under the Equality Act 2010[3]. This more 'all encompassing' approach allows us to consider a wider range of evidence, not least because much of the survey evidence already relies on subjective reports rather than objective assessments of harassment. Indeed, a problem in identifying the prevalence of harassment is that in many surveys, harassment is not even defined, relying instead on the respondent's understanding of the concept, while in other surveys harassment is grouped together with other concepts such as intimidation or abuse.

Given our concern with the relationship between harassment/intimidation and censorship, our review primarily explored evidence of self-censorship, rather than the more traditional forms like state-sponsored censorship or strategic litigation censoring journalists and the media. Some degree of self-censorship is part of everyday life for most people. It can have positive and negative consequences[4]. For this review, our interest was in self-censorship as an individual decision to censor one's thoughts or actions as a result of actual, perceived or anticipated harassment. Self-censorship is not a binary between total silence and complete free expression. Rather, it involves a spectrum that includes people's decisions to modify what they feel they can and can't say.

The expert roundtable[5] conducted as part of this review highlighted a series of examples where even those public figures who are vocal on a range of issues report holding back on other issues due to fear of harassment. Throughout this review, we use the terms censorship and self-censorship interchangeably unless otherwise noted.

This review is not a comprehensive examination of the issues relating to harassment, intimidation or censorship in the UK today. While best efforts were made to be as comprehensive as possible, the inclusion or exclusion of specific themes should not be taken as evidence that such harassment or censorship does not exist and should take into consideration that this was a rapid evidence review. Details of our search strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria are included in Appendix 1.

**The challenge of measuring the scale of harassment and censorship in the UK**

Measuring the extent of harassment and censorship in the UK is challenging. The available data and evidence on harassment and censorship is uneven and of varying quality – often with a narrower or more specific scope than the broader interest of this review. Existing data sets tend to focus only on online harassment, or broader hate crime data that have more specific thresholds to harassment. In recent literature, much of the analysis is limited to the specifics of the Online Safety Bill.

The challenge of quantifying trends is made greater by the different approaches to its measurement, leading to different trend data. Measurement improvements have seen police-recorded hate crime almost treble in the last ten years[6]. However, over the same period, the Crime Survey of England and Wales (which did not adopt the same methodological changes) recorded a sustained decline[7]. This is further complicated by the variety of definitions used for harassment, censorship and related but distinct terms such as hate crime – where the trends are also shaped by increased ability to report and reduced stigma around reporting.

A further challenge is the reliance on survey data for measuring harassment and censorship as subjective rather than objective experiences. Several of the surveys reviewed here add much to our understanding of the scale and nature of censorship and harassment from a subjective perspective. However, for other surveys, their small sample size and self-selecting nature makes them less representative of the population as a whole and specific sub-groups. These methodological issues present the risk of a particular skew when examining

[3] Equality Act 2010, S26(4)(c)
[4] I Fadnes, (2021) 'Introduction; Safety for journalists and self-censorship' in *Journalist Safety and Self-Censorship.* London, Routledge, Ch. 1
[5] A summary of the expert roundtable is available in Appendix 2
[6] See Crest Advisory for discussion of trends of rising reporting of hate crimes reported to police but falling perceptions of hate crimes in the Crime Survey for England and Wales: https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/the-state-of-hate-trends-in-hate-crime-over-the-past-decade
[7] Official Statistics, Hate crime, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022

harassment and censorship - it is somewhat inevitable that those who are most affected or most vocal on these issues are the most likely to respond to open surveys on them.

Given these challenges, this review has adopted a mixed source approach that includes survey data from a range of sources but notes, where appropriate, the limitations of reliability of the data. We include survey data (nationally and sub-group representative) on perceived feelings of harassment and censorship, reported abuse/incident data collected by civil society organisations, official government statistics (in the few cases that they are relevant), and data on online harassment which is more readily available.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the breadth of academic and grey literature does provide some answers with appropriate caveats to the review questions. However, this review is best considered in the round, and caution should be exercised extrapolating data from any specific source outside the context of the broader analysis. A more systematic study of these issues would provide more scope to draw conclusions from the data.

# Section 1 – The scale of harassment and censorship in the UK

This review's approach to understanding the scale of harassment and censorship in the UK is informed by the validity and reliability of the available evidence.

- **Most of the evidence on harassment and censorship relies on subjective perceptions of survey respondents**. While we have supplemented this with some objective evidence from official reporting (such as hate crime statistics) and the unofficial reporting of civil society organisations (such as the Community Safety Trust), the majority of evidence considered for this review relies on subjective perceptions of both harassment and censorship.
- **We explored harassment and censorship at three levels – the societal level, the institutional level, and the group level**. This review makes separate assessments of the trends in trajectory of both harassment and censorship at each of these levels.
- **Our review focused on the scale of subjective experiences of harassment at the societal, institutional and group level**. The evidence explored in both the academic and grey literature did not assess the increasing severity of harassment and censorship at the more extreme level. The Government's Independent Advisor on Social Cohesion and Resilience has received significant anecdotal evidence about increasingly extreme cases of harassment (e.g., rape threats and death threats) and censorship (e.g., job losses and no-platforming). This is an area which would urgently benefit from more original research at each of societal, institutional and group level.
- **One of the challenges identified by the expert roundtable[8] was the increasing normalisation of harassment and censorship** at the societal, institutional and group level. This is likely to suppress even self-reported levels of harassment and censorship.
- **While some longitudinal survey data does not show rising trends in recent years, the levels of harassment and self-censorship across society and certain institutions and sub-groups remain consistently high**. The Crime Survey for England and Wales' find that one in ten people experience harassment every year. This equates to millions of people across the country.

## 1.1 The societal level

### 1.1.1 The scale of harassment at a societal level in the UK

As highlighted above this review relies on a subjective definition of harassment based on the government's definition of workplace harassment as "behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated or offended[9]". The data on harassment that we have considered in our review includes both online or offline environments and includes harassment that is illegal in either a civil or criminal sense, but also harassment that is not illegal, but relies on subjective experiences of harassment reported in surveys. While the government's working definition on workplace harassment and bullying relates people with protected characteristics, our review looks beyond those individuals and groups with protected characteristics.

Making an assessment about the scale of harassment in the UK, and changes over time, relies on a series of data points from survey data (for subjective instances of harassment) official statistics (for more objective instances of harassment) and group-specific reporting data gathered by civil society organisations.

*Survey Evidence*

The most readily available source of data is the annual crime surveys which record public perceptions across a range of crimes, rather than recorded offences themselves. The most recent crime survey in England and Wales (September 2022) finds over one in ten (11.1 per cent) of surveyed adults reporting that they

[8] Summary and key findings available in Annex 2

[9] Workplace bullying and harassment, GOV.UK

experienced harassment in the previous six months[10]. The ONS is experimenting with several different methodologies to better capture experiences of harassment in the UK. In Scotland, the Crime and Justice Survey has recorded similar proportions of the population reporting being insulted or harassed outside their homes. Given changes in reporting in England and Wales, it is not possible to assess longitudinal trends, but the Scottish figures show relative stability over the past decade[11].

The Alan Turing Institute's systematic review of survey data estimates that between 30 per cent and 40 per cent of people in the UK have been exposed to online abuse and between 10 per cent to 20 per cent of people in the UK have been targeted by abusive content online[12]. These estimates are based on the Turing Institute's data review on exposure/experiences of being targeted by online abuse using data from the Oxford Internet Survey (2019), Ofcom and the Cybersmile Foundation.

*Official Statistics and Reported Evidence*

Several sources document instances of harassment and related issues such as hate crime that, rather than relying on self-reporting, meet an objective test. There remain limitations to using these data points as evidence for trend changes – for example, an increase in overall levels of hate crime can be more indicative of methodological improvements and people being more comfortable in reporting hate crime than a substantive increase in hate crime[13]. With this caveat in mind, the following data points give a sense of the scale and trends on harassment and hate crime:

- Home Office hate crime figures show a consistent year-on-year increase in hate crime over the last decade and a 26% increase between 2021 and 2022[14]. While hate crime is distinct from harassment (and subject to more exacting standards), the increase provides an indication of rising levels of harassment. Similar trends were found in reported online hate crime according to transparency data from big tech companies[15]
- Freedom of Information (FOI) requests on offences charged and pursued under Section 127 of the Communications Act give a further indication of the scale and trends of harassment. FOI requests made to the Metropolitan Police by the Alan Turing Institute show offence rates at 200 offences per 100,000 people in London in 2016. More recent requests to the Crown Prosecution Service show a 27 per cent increase in charges resulting in court hearings for S127 Communications Act offences and offences under Malicious Communications Act 1988[16].

*Civil Society Reports*

Survey data and official statistics are supplemented by reports from civil society organisations acting as unofficial reporting bodies for certain types of abuse and harassment, such as TellMAMA on Islamophobic abuse and harassment, and the Community Safety Trust for antisemitic abuse and harassment. Both these organisations record a general upward trend in the volume of harassment and abuse toward their communities discussed below.

***Overall trends on harassment at a societal level***

Overall, given the uneven and varied nature of the data sources, our assessment is that on current data, instances of harassment, even when using more subjective tests, are at low but far from negligible levels. At a society-wide level, the evidence available does not support a conclusive finding of a large or sustained trend rise in harassment. However, it is also clear that traditional methods of understanding and reporting data on harassment would not and are not identifying many of the examples we have heard about anecdotally. The limitations of this data were discussed in by the expert roundtable, with participants agreeing that more work is needed to more robustly and accurately gather data on harassment that does not rely on self-reporting.

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[10] Crime in England and Wales: year ending September 2022, Office of National Statistics (ONS)
[11] Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2019/20: main findings, March 2021
[12] B. Vidgen, H. Margetts, A. Harris, (2019) How much online abuse is there? A systematic review of evidence for the UK Policy Briefing – Full Report, Alan Turing Institute
[13] Official Statistics, Hate crime, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022
[14] Hate Crime Statistics, ibid.
[15] How much online abuse is there? Alan Turing Institute, p20
[16] *'Rise in online abuse and malicious communications offences in Bedfordshire'* Bedford Today, 3 November 2022

### 1.1.2. The scale of self-censorship in the UK at a societal level

By its nature, measuring the scale and trend of censorship in the UK is more challenging than measuring harassment. Given the paucity of available data on levels of self-censorship at a population-wide level in the UK in recent years, it is not possible to definitively determine absolute levels of self-censorship or evidence or trends in self-censorship.

There is little representative survey evidence, official statistics or evidence gathered by civil society organisations which captures individuals' decisions to limit or change their thoughts or actions because of actual or perceived harassment. As discussed, experiences of self-censorship exist on a spectrum from complete silencing to having a smaller impact on what people will and will not say and do – this nuance is rarely captured in the limited survey evidence available. In addition, some degree of filtering or self-censorship is healthy for social interaction. It can be a measure of a person's maturity and wisdom not to express all of their thoughts, but instead to calibrate their communications to their audience. This kind of self-censorship is of course not an issue of concern, but it is a subjective assessment as to where the line between healthy and unhealthy self-censorship should be drawn.

Some academic research suggests that around that around 15 per cent of social media users "often" self-censor their posts to avoiding causing offence[17]. These findings have been replicated elsewhere – studies in the US found that 27 per cent of US internet users censored their online posts out of fear of being harassed[18].

Recent polling by YouGov sheds some light on Britons' experiences of self-censorship today[19]:

- 57 per cent of respondents stated that at least sometimes they stop themselves from expressing views on political or social issues because of fear or judgment or negative responses from others, compared to just 27 per cent who say they always express their views.
- YouGov's research found that those with more socially conservative views were more likely to self-censor on certain issues. For example, a third (33 per cent) who believe immigration has been bad for the UK say they always or mostly have to hide their views, compared to just 10 per cent of those who think it was a good thing. Near-identical breakdowns were found for those who think ethnic minorities 'have things as good as white Britons', for those who think transgender women aren't women, and for those who think a law against burkas should be introduced.

More in Common's polling by YouGov in 2020 and 2021[20] found similar trends that also help to fill the gaps in the data on self-censorship on particular topics and issues in the UK:

- 76 per cent of Britons say that there is 'pressure to speak a certain way about subjects such as immigration and immigrants[21]'.
- 66 per cent of the public say they are 'worried about the aggressive tone of public debate in the UK[22]'.

This data suggests a relatively high level of self-censorship among the British public. This is not altogether unexpected or surprising. Censoring views and opinions are a part of everyday life – and More in Common's focus group research finds, in line with the discussion above, that for many people in Britain, self-censorship is seen as a virtue. When self-censorship is dangerous, however, is when it is driven by actual or perceived harassment. The current survey data reviewed for this report does not capture these dynamics effectively and this is one of the gaps that could be addressed in the future.

Related to self-censorship is the notion of 'cancel culture'. Being 'cancelled' refers to being ostracised and excluded from public life based on the perceived actions or statements on the part of the individual concerned. Instances of 'cancelling' are often driven by very small vocal progressive minorities online. During evidence gathering for this review, we heard several examples of cancel culture, from being uninvited from speaking events through to people being targeted in their place of employment with the threat of losing their

[17] E Dubois, Swarz J, Self-censorship, Polarization, and the 'Spiral of Silence' on Social Media, 2018
[18] Online Harassment, Digital Abuse, and Cyberstalking in America 2016
[19] Cancel culture: what views are Britons afraid to express? YouGov, 2021, N=1,677
[20] Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T., Kimaram, A. (2020): Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain. More in Common (2020 N=2710, 2021 N=2107)
[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid

job. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals operating in certain environments such as universities and arts institutions are particularly susceptible to a 'cancel culture'. Cancel culture can also apply to specific 'works' as well as individuals. A proposed rewriting of Roald Dahl's books being a high-profile example at the time of this review[23] where original works are changed (rather than completely cancelled) to remove perceived offensive elements. However, it is important to note that there is broad consensus that people should lose their job for making grossly offensive comments. But, as further illustrated by the debate, live at the time of writing this review, over Gary Lineker's comments on the Government's refugee policy, determining the proper threshold for taking disciplinary or other action is more contentious[24].

Polling by More in Common has found one in five Britons say that something or someone they like has been banned, withdrawn, or cancelled due to public pressure in the last few years, but only 7 per cent have tried to personally get something/someone banned because they disagreed with it[25]. Research by King's College London also shows an increasing level of awareness and discussion of cancel culture – with news articles about 'cancel culture' in the UK rising sharply from just six mentions in 2018 to 3,670 in 2021[26]. This was matched by a significant increase in recognition of the term 'cancel culture' among the public – from 39 per cent to 60 per cent between 2020 and 2022[27].

*1.1.3. Overall trends on censorship in the UK at a societal level*

Given the gaps in the evidence at a society-wide level, it is difficult to assess whether there has been a general trend of increasing self-censorship or whether this has been affected by high levels of harassment. However, it is clear that a significant majority of the public feel pressure to speak a certain way on certain issues, and that those who hold more socially conservative views feel these pressures most acutely.

There is also a growing debate about 'cancel culture' as a phenomenon and while there is no robust method for collecting data on incidents of 'cancelling', anecdotal and media reports suggest that instances are growing in both prevalence and severity, in particular with people losing their job as a consequence of causing offence.

### 1.2. The institutional level

In contrast to the societal level, there is more evidence available to quantify levels of harassment and censorship at the institutional level and greater scope to assess trends in harassment and censorship on an institution-by-institution basis.

#### 1.2.1. Harassment and censorship of MPs

Surveys of Members of Parliament over the last decade have shown consistently high levels of self-reported abuse. The academic and grey literature examined for this review did not find evidence that the scale or severity of harassment had changed over time, but there is paucity of reliable studies that allow us to draw a firm conclusion about longer term trends. However, in the aftermath of the murders of Jo Cox MP and David Amess MP, this issue has received significantly more public attention[28]. Research in this area should be continued and expanded, and Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) should consider further work to understand any changing trends in harassment of MPs going forward.

For harassment and censorship faced by MPs, our review relied on two main sources of information – firstly, studies of MPs survey data exploring harassment and censorship, and secondly, data analysis of abuse faced by parliamentarians on online platforms such as Twitter.

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[23] Roald Dahl: Rishi Sunak joins criticism of changes to author's books, BBC News, 20th February 2023

[24] Ros Atkins on… Gary Lineker and the BBC's impartiality crisis

[25] Tryl, L., Burns, C. Dixon, T. (2021): Dousing the Flames: How leaders can better navigate cultural change in 2020s Britain. More in Common

[26] Woke, cancel culture and white privilege – the shifting terms of the UK's "culture war", Kings College London, The Policy Institute, May 2022

[27] Ibid

[28] Several news articles have outlined the abuse MPs face 'Trolls deluge MPs with rape and murder threats' The Times, 17th October 2021, 'Mistreatment of women MPs revealed' BBC News, 25th January 2017 and 'MPs tell of death threats and abuse at 2017 election' BBC News, 18th September 2017

*Survey data*

A 2015 study[29] (exploring MP survey data from 2010) found that 81 per cent of MPs who responded had experienced at least one from a list of 12 intrusive or aggressive behaviours in the course of their work. More than half of respondents (55 per cent) had experienced one of these behaviours in the previous year (2009). The authors estimate was that more than half of MPs (53 per cent) had experienced stalking or harassment at some point in the course of their work. This study found no significant differences based on age, gender, or political party (James et al, 2016). For abuse that occurred in the year prior to the survey (2009), 14 per cent of MPs had been subjected to physical attack(s), three in ten MPs (31 per cent) had received personal threats of harm or harm to people close to them, and 18 per cent of MPs had their property interfered with. A more recent survey[30] in 2019 found even higher levels – 81 per cent of respondents reported that they or their staff had faced abuse in the past year, with 63 per cent saying that they had been in contact with the police about threats in the last 12 months.

The 'Representative Audit of Britain' survey in 2017 and 2019 provide a broader picture of harassment experienced during the election process. The audit sends questionnaires to all those who stood as candidates in the 2017 and 2019 General Elections. When candidates were asked if they had personally experienced any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to their security during the campaign, 38 per cent of candidates in 2017 and 49 per cent of candidates in 2019 reported that they suffered from some form of harassment or intimidation, although varying response rates may help account for these differences. This suggests that the level of harassment faced by candidates in parliamentary elections is consistently high[31].

The Representative Audit surveys found significant gender differences in the results. In the 2019 survey, 58 per cent of female candidates reported experiencing harassment, intimidation, or abuse, compared to 44 per cent of male candidates who said the same. Further, when asked to rate how unsafe they felt during the campaign, from 0 (safe) to 10 (unsafe), female candidates gave higher ratings of feeling unsafe – an average of 4 compared to 2.7 for male candidates – albeit with the majority still giving a score closer to safe rather than unsafe. These issues were explored by Channel 4 Dispatches in the 2022 programme "MPs under Threat" [32].

It should also be noted, for clarity, that the Representative Audit survey uses a more general framing of harassment, asking if respondents had *ever* experienced it, as opposed to being prompted on specific examples in the case of the 2010 survey.

*Analysis of abuse on Twitter*

Numerous studies have focused on the abuse faced by MPs on Twitter. Our assessment of these studies across the academic and grey literature identifies a series of trends, including some more counter-intuitive findings, on the level and distribution of abuse faced by MPs.

- **Abusive tweets to MPs make up a low proportion of overall tweets MPs receive**. Studies estimate that between two to five per cent of the overall tweets that MPs receive are abusive, with this remaining fairly consistent over time. Greenwood (2019) found that the proportion of abusive replies to MPs have fluctuated at a relatively low level in recent years – from 2.97 per cent at the 2015 General Election, to 3.33 per cent at the 2017 General Election, to 3.05 per cent at the 2019 General Election).[33]

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[29] James D et al, Harassment and stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences, 2016. *This survey had a relatively low response rate (38 per cent / 239 MPs); however, the results correspond with findings from identical surveys conducted in Queensland Australia, New Zealand, and Norway with higher response rates, suggesting the data is reliable.*

[30] MPs describe threats, abuse, and safety fears, BBC News, 6th August 2017. This was a non-peer reviewed study with a 28 per cent response rate (179 MPs).

[31] The 2017 'Representative Audit of Britain' survey had a 53 per cent response rate, compared to 36 per cent in the 2019 edition

[32] Channel 4 Dispatches, 'MPs under Threat', 1st July 2022

[33] Greenwood's analysis focuses on tweets using obscene nouns ("cunt", "twat", etc.), racist or otherwise bigoted language and milder insults ("you idiot", "coward") – defining "abuse" broadly; "hate speech", where religious,

- **The evidence suggests that male MPs on Twitter receive more abuse than female MPs.** While this finding may be counter-intuitive, this trend is found across every study analysed which includes both male and female MPs in their analysis[34], however there are some challenges around the classifications of abuse which may affect these trends. Ward and McLoughlin (2020) found that three per cent of replies to male MPs were abusive, compared to 1.7 per cent for female MPs – but they also suggest that while women may receive less abuse overall, they receive a greater amount of more severe abuse[35]. Whereas Greenwood et al found that when coding abusive words by severity "women are significantly more likely to be targeted with milder words". Southern and Harmer (2019) find that while men received more uncivil tweets in general, women received more tweets than men stereotyping them (0.8 vs 0.3 per cent) and questioning their position (0.8 vs 0.7 per cent), with men receiving more tweets that included name-calling, swearing, or questioned intelligence[36].
- **Conservative MPs receive more abuse than those from other parties.** The difference is smaller than that for gender and may be explained by the fact that the Conservatives formed the governing party during the study periods. The statistical significance of the gap disappears in some studies when controlling for the MP's 'prominence'[37].
- **There is conflicting evidence on differences in levels of harassment faced by white and ethnic minority MPs**. For example, Greenwood (2019) found that ethnic minority MPs received 1.35 per cent abusive responses compared to 1.44 per cent for white MPs in the same period, which was not statistically significant[38]. Similarly, Southern and Harmer (2019) found no significant differences based on ethnicity of MPs for any indicator of abuse[39]. However, Amnesty International (2017) found that black and Asian MPs did receive more abuse in their study, where 20 BAME MPs received almost half (41%) of the abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study.
- **Abuse is far less prevalent for less prominent MPs**. When the middle 50 per cent of MPs by prominence are isolated, Ward and McLoughlin (2019) found that less prominent MPs received significantly less abuse, with 0.95 per cent of their replies being coded abusive, compared to 2.57 per cent for the sample as a whole[40]. Similarly, of the more severe category of abuse classed by the authors as 'hate speech', which made up 0.42 per cent of all replies, only 6.6 per cent of MPs received abuse during a 2.5-month period (forming just 0.0039 per cent of all replies for the middle 50 per cent of MPs). These findings have been replicated in the other studies discussed in this section.

These findings suggest that levels of harassment of MPs are high and have remained consistently high over the last decade. The survey data shows that female MPs are more likely to report experiencing harassment, but analysis suggests does not necessarily extend to platforms such as Twitter.

MPs report that harassment has led to self-censoring in public life. Ward and McLoughlin (2020) find that some MPs have removed themselves from Twitter as a result of abuse and some say they self-censor before communicating on social media[41]. The Independent Committee on Standards in Public Life concluded that that "the overwhelming view of Parliamentary candidates who provided evidence to the Committee was that intimidation is already discouraging individuals from standing for public offices"[42]. High levels of harassment of candidates for elected office and sitting MPs appears to be deterring participation in public life, and prompting

racial or gender groups are denigrated, but not limited to hate speech, include all manners of attacks and threats, but not obscene language (e.g. "fucking", "bloody") as it is less likely to be targeted at the politician personally.

[34] Ward and McLoughlin, 2020 "Turds, traitors and tossers: the abuse of UK MPs via Twitter", Which politicians receive abuse? Four factors illuminated in the UK general election 2019 (Gorrell et al, 2020), Twitter, Incivility and "Everyday" Gendered Othering: An Analysis of Tweets Sent to UK Members of Parliament (Southern and Harmer, 2019)

[35] Ward and McLoughlin, 2020 "Turds, traitors and tossers: the abuse of UK MPs via Twitter

[36] Ibid, Southern and Harmer, 2019

[37] Greenwood, M.A, Online Abuse of UK MPs from 2015 to 2019: Working Paper, University of Sheffield, 2019

[38] Ibid, Greenwood et al, 2019

[39] Ibid, Southern and Harmer

[40] Ibid, Ward and McLoughlin

[41] Ibid, Ward and McLoughlin

[42] Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, December 2017

MPs to withdraw from public life more quickly than otherwise might occur. This loss of MPs and potential MPs of high calibre represents a significant threat to the long-term strength of our democratic institutions.

### 1.2.2. Harassment and censorship in Local Government

Levels of harassment and censorship faced by MPs are matched, and to some extent are more pronounced, at a local government level. Research from the Local Government Association (LGA)[43] found that councillors are often on the receiving end of harassment and intimidation:

- Almost nine in ten councillors (88 per cent) report experiencing abuse or intimidation in their role as a councillor or candidate[44]
- Almost a quarter of councillors feel at risk (including four per cent who frequently feel at risk). This is even higher for female councillors of whom 31 per cent report feeling at risk as part of their job[45]

Our review found high levels of harassment faced by councillors but there was no robust evidence available on overall trends. Similarly, while there is no direct evidence available comparing the experiences of harassment and censorship by local councillors and MPs (and the higher levels of harassment reported by councillors), the LGA's report into the effect of harassment on local government reports that 59 per cent of respondents experienced abuse in response to trigger events. The most common trigger events appears to be contentious planning or licensing decisions[46]. Councillors deal with events which have a very direct and material impact on people's lives and as such, the causes of harassment can often be very direct too.

Beyond survey evidence collected by the Local Government Association, 69 per cent of councils report that they gather data on harassment and abuse experienced by both councillors and council officers[47] which provides an additional source of data. However, only a few shared this data directly with the LGA limiting our ability to rely on this reported data for our review.

The high levels of harassment faced by local representatives appears to be having a direct effect on the decision to stand for or seek re-election. The LGA reported that more than a quarter of councillors (27 per cent) were unwilling to seek council office again, and of that group, most (68 per cent) said that abuse and intimidation had influenced their decision not to do so[48].

### 1.2.3. Harassment and censorship faced by journalists and the media

The levels of harassment, intimidation and abuse faced by journalists in the UK and around the world have become increasingly well documented in recent years. The death of journalist Lyra McKee in Northern Ireland in 2019 and the BBC's then Political Editor, Laura Kuenssberg, requiring security detail at the 2017 Labour Party Conference illustrate the risks that journalists face in doing their job.

There is a growing evidence base on the threats, harassment, abuse, and intimidation faced by journalists in the UK. The research has also begun to explore the impact of this harassment on journalists self-censoring.

More than nine in ten journalists responding to the NUJ Members Safety Report (92 per cent) reported that abuse of journalists had increased[49] while almost four in five (78 per cent) felt that 'abuse and harassment has become normalised and seen as part of the job[50]'. At a regional level, more than four in five journalists report that that the problem of harassment had become significantly worse since they started their careers[51], while two in five regional journalists say they spend more than an hour each week reading and dealing with abuse.

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[43] Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy, Local Government Association, June 2022
[44] Ibid, Local Government Association
[45] Ibid, Local Government Association
[46] Ibid, Local Government Association
[47] 2022 Local Government Workforce Survey, Local Government Association, January 2023
[48] Ibid, Debate Not Hate, Local Government Association
[49] Combatting Online Harassment and Abuse: A Legal Guide for Journalists in England and Wales, Media Lawyers Association, June 2021
[50] NUJ Members Safety Report, November 2020
[51] The onslaught of online abuse and the toll on regional journalists, Society of Editors, September 2020

While much of this evidence does not explore the drivers behind these high and increasing levels of abuse and harassment, the expert roundtable convened for this review identified social media as a key driver of increasing abuse. The News Media Association also highlighted that harassment and abuse faced by local journalists (particularly online) increases whenever their local area becomes the focus of national media, such as due to a high-profile individual case such as a murder or missing person[52].

In the 2020 DCMS Call for Evidence[53] on the safety of journalists, one in three journalists said threats and harassments took place at least a few times a year. One in three female journalists said that they do not feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK and crucially, when examining the relationship between harassment and self-censorship, one in seven journalists said the nature of harassment, abuse and threats meant they avoided certain topics or issues out of fear or the risk of violence. This largely mirrors global surveys which find around three in ten journalists reporting self-censorship as a result of harassment[54].

There is some academic research to suggest that these self-reported levels of self-censorship are artificially low because the 'tough-mindedness' of newsrooms and journalists mean that many are reluctant to admit self-censorship[55]. However, even these low levels of self-censorship are significant – Binns (2017) argues that this "cuts to the heart of journalistic practice" and "editorial independence from outside pressure is the basic ethos of most newsrooms". The Media Lawyers Association found that persistent and growing abuse towards journalists is leading to significant numbers of journalists leaving their newsrooms, women publishing without by-lines or under pseudonyms, and some deciding to stop publishing altogether[56].

While this review has mostly focused on self-censorship as a result of individual experiences of harassment and abuse in the UK, it should be noted that journalists and the media face more direct forms of censorship in the form of Strategic Litigation against Public Participation (SLAPPs). Article 19's 'London Calling' report (2022) outlined the role that SLAPPs play in censoring journalistic output – meaning that many journalists face the twin challenges of both direct censorship pressures and self-censoring. Article 19 and the Foreign Policy Centre identify the UK and London as the 'leading jurisdiction' for domestic and transnational SLAPP cases against the media and outline the intention and effects of SLAPPS to 'stifle scrutiny and debate on matters of public interest'[57].

**1.2.4. Harassment and censorship in Academia and Universities**

Harassment and censorship in British universities, and in academia more broadly, has been a subject of considerable debate in the UK in recent years. Although subject to similar data limitations as other topics covered in this review, survey data of students in UK universities over time, and the rise of 'new' sources of harassment and self-censorship such as of gender-critical commentators, suggest that both harassment and self-censorship have increased in academic contexts in recent years.

In relative terms, academic staff in the UK are more likely to self-censor (35.5 per cent agree) compared to their European counterparts (19.1 per cent EU average)[58]. Some argue that the *de jure* protections for academic freedom in the UK are weaker than elsewhere in Europe, with one study placing the UK in the

[52] Roundtable Discussion, see Annex 2

[53] DCMS, Call for Evidence Report, Journalist Safety, November 2021. It is worth noting that this is a self-selecting call for evidence, but ultimately representative of journalistic community in UK by age, gender, and employment status)

[54] Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison, Waisbord: Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, 2020

[55] Binns, A, Fair game? Journalists' experiences of online abuse, 2017

[56] Ibid, Media Lawyers Association

[57] 'London Calling': The issue of legal intimidation and SLAPPs against media emanating from the United Kingdom, Article 19, April 2022

[58] Karran, T., and Mallinson, L., Academic Freedom in the U.K.: Legal and Normative Protection in a Comparative Context, University and College Union, May 2017. This question asked whether respondents had ever undertaken self-censorship (that is, refrained from publishing, teaching, talking or doing research on a particular topic), for fear of negative repercussions, such as loss of privileges, demotion, physical harm.

penultimate position ahead of only Estonia[59]. A Parliamentary Report on Freedom of Speech in Universities identified a series of additional challenges facing freedom of speech in UK universities - from the higher profile no platforming rules to excessive bureaucracy, regulatory complexity and poor guidance provided to university leaders. This report found that much censorship is caused less by drivers such as fear and harassment, but by risk aversion in a complex regulatory environment[60].

However, there is evidence that ideological homogeneity has an impact on perceptions of harassment and active self-censorship for groups with minority political views. Studies such as Karran and Mallison (2017) have found that academic staff in universities tend to hold more left-wing political views than the wider population. In a 2017 survey, only six per cent of academic staff identified as being right wing[61], while another cross-country study including the UK found a 76-11 per cent left/right-wing split among academic staff in 2022[62]. This is compared to a 30-23 per cent split among the public[63], where a further 22 per cent describe themselves as 'centre' and a quarter (24 per cent) 'don't know'. Another UK-specific survey from 2014-6 found that no more than 15 per cent of academics identified with the Conservative party[64] (Policy Exchange, 2020), compared to 44 per cent of voters at the last general election[65]. These trends extend to the political leanings of student bodies. Estimates by King's College London predict that only 13-14 per cent of students voted for Leave[66], compared to 52 per cent of voters across the UK. A paper from the Legatum Institute (2022) concluded that "the growing dominance of particular ideological perspectives on campus…are leading to a 'monoculture' that is hostile to alternative views, voices and beliefs", with "university academics and students who do not share these perspectives…experiencing a hostile environment on campus and, as a result, are 'self-censoring' their views"[67].

In this context, the long-standing evidence on the 'spiral of silence' is relevant[68]. This occurs where individuals in communities are more likely to self-censor when they perceive or are aware that their views are minority views in a community. Given the prevalence of progressive views in academia, it is likely that people with more conservative views, especially those that are socially conservative, are much less likely to feel comfortable expressing them in university settings.

The evidence assessed for this review suggests that these dynamics are already playing out. A study of over 500 University students in the UK found that fewer than 40 per cent of Leave-supporting students felt they could express views on Brexit in front of their classmates, compared to nearly 90 per cent of Remain supporters who felt comfortable expressing their views[69]. Another recent study found that about 15 per cent of academics said they would discriminate against a paper expressing a different ideology, 20 per cent of academics would oppose grant applications submitted by those whose political views they do not share and 30-35 per cent of academics would oppose a new hire with different ideologies[70]. However, much of the high-profile anecdotal evidence focused less on self-censorship by minority communities, and more on harassment and cancel culture in academia.

Polling data from the Higher Education Policy Institute suggests that students in UK universities are becoming less tolerant of opposing views over time[71]. Polling of full-time undergraduates (N=1000), conducted in 2016 and again in 2022, using a market research agency specialising in youth research found:

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[59] Ibid
[60] Freedom of Speech in Universities, House of Commons-House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights, March 2018
[61] Ibid, Karran and Mallinson (N=2,284)
[62] Is Academic Freedom Under Threat, Legatum Institute, January 2022
[63] Britain's Choice, More in Common 2020
[64] Academic freedom in the UK, Policy Exchange, 2020
[65] Ibid, Britain's Choice
[66] Grant et al, Freedom of expression in UK universities, December 2019
[67] Ibid, Legatum Institute, January 2022
[68] E. Noelle-Neumann, The Spiral of Silence A Theory of Public Opinion, June 1974
[69] Simpson and Kaufmann, Academic freedom in the UK, November 2019
[70] Honeycutt and Freberg, The Liberal and Conservative Experience Across Academic Disciplines: An Extension of Inbar and Lammers, September 2016
[71] 'You can't say that!' What students really think of free speech on campus (HEPI Policy Note 35)

- 61 per cent of students say, 'when in doubt' their own university 'should ensure all students are protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech' (up from 37 per cent in 2016).
- The proportion of students who believe 'universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints' has risen to 38 per cent (from 24 per cent in 2016). This view is more commonly held by male students (51 per cent) than female students (28 per cent).
- The proportion of students who agree that 'if you debate an issue like sexism or racism, you make it acceptable' has doubled to 35 per cent from 17 per cent in 2016.
- 36 per cent of students think academics should be fired if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students' (more than double the 15 per cent who said the same in 2016)

Similar findings have been reported elsewhere. A 2022 survey from King's College London of British students in Higher Education (N=1537) found 43 per cent of students agree that 'I feel unable to express my views in my university because I'm scared of disagreeing with my peers' – a 25 per cent increase since 2019[72]. Again, this could point to changing social dynamics among young Britons on and off campus and is not necessarily connected to specific actions of higher education institutions.

Recent years have also seen much attention on the attempted or actual cancellation of events and debates in universities because of apparently controversial views by the speakers. These attempts at 'no-platforming' speakers take several forms, from complaints to university authorities, protests, and occasionally violent disruption of the events. Many of these instances are well documented – such as Selina Todd requiring security guards to accompany her to lectures due to her stance on trans and gender identity issues[73], the condemnation of Oxford Professor Nigel Biggar's scholarship on the British empire and alleged cancellation of his book[74], and Amber Rudd, the former Conservative Home Secretary, being disinvited from an Oxford student society event[75]. At our expert roundtable we heard about the chilling effect that 'no-platforming' is having, particularly for those with right-of-centre views. The data on the prevalence of no-platform policies is more ambiguous. Office for Students data shows that from 2018 to 2021, over 120,000 events took place at universities and colleges in England. Out of 19,407 total events in 2020–21, 193 speakers were rejected. The reasons given for the vast majority of these cancellations were 'procedural' or 'health and safety' grounds. While on the face of it , the fact that less than one per cent of all events were cancelled suggests that no platforming is relatively uncommon, it may be however that those who are cancelled tend to come from the same ideological point of view.

Furthermore, some observers argue that this current data is artificially low because there are limited formal mechanisms for reporting of disinvitations or cancel culture. Advocates of this view suggest that those reports are the tip of the iceberg and the problem is that many speakers do not get invited in the first place. The Free Speech Union argues that university policies on equity and diversity, workplace harassment and avoiding "disrepute" have been weaponised and often override and undermine institutional commitments to free speech. The Free Speech Union has argued that this is especially prevalent in research or public debate arguing against academic orthodoxy on race, gender and sexual orientation, and critical research that rejects 'systemic racism' or explores socially conservative approaches to welfare and immigration[76].

The Legatum Institute also cites a dynamic among moderate academics – even those who may not consider themselves on the fringes of political or ideological opinion in their communities[77]. Legatum's 2022 paper on academic freedom argues that a 'small minority' of 'ideologically radical and organised activists' wield 'considerable influence over university culture' leaving 'moderate academics unable or unwilling to speak out'. More in Common's research has found elsewhere that strategies which increase support and standing for in-group moderates can make a positive difference as opposed to leaving debates to take place solely between fringe groups[78]. Supporting in-group moderates in the university context could help diffuse these highly polarised debates and unlock progress.

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[72] Kings College London Study
[73] Oxford professor given protection following threats from trans activists, BBC News, 25th January 2020
[74] Oxford historians object to empire project, BBC News, 20th December 2017
[75] Amber Rudd 'no platformed' by Oxford University society, BBC News, 6th March 2020
[76] Threats to Academic Freedom in Britain, Free Speech Union, April 2020
[77] Ibid, Legatum Institute
[78] Ibid, Dousing the Flames, More in Common

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill currently in the final stages of passage through Parliament – seeks to address concerns that higher education institutions are permitting a general atmosphere of intolerance towards differing opinions leading to a 'chilling effect' on free speech[79]. The bill aims to enforce statutory duties on providers and extend free speech provisions to cover students' unions who are not currently covered by legislation. Some participants in the expert roundtable felt that the only way to ensure universities take free speech seriously was to introduce a series of financial sanctions, while also expressing concerns that making it easier to punish universities who do not uphold free speech obligations would discourage them from inviting controversial speakers in the first place.

**1.2.5. Harassment and censorship in the Arts**

Reports of increasing harassment and censorship of specific groups in academic settings are mirrored in the arts sector. A recent quasi-qualitative survey (Arts Professional, 2020) explored the levels of self-censorship faced by more socially conservative artists in the arts sector[80]. More than 80 per cent of respondents agreed that "workers in the arts and cultural sector who share controversial opinions risk being professionally ostracised". The research suggests the arts and cultural sector have an intolerance to a series of viewpoints extending from anything that might be considered "politically incorrect", to support or sympathy for Brexit, the Conservative Party, or other right-wing political parties. In the UK and the US, comedians have found themselves under fire for insensitivity towards minority groups (in the case of Dave Chappelle[81] and Ricky Gervais[82] on jokes about transgender people). This has led not only to direct abuse of the comedians but also a wider debate about their legitimacy and whether they should be cancelled or de-platformed. The Arts Professional survey asked what type of opinion would be ill-considered to share publicly in the arts and cultural sector. The most common response was support for the Conservatives or any other right-wing party, while few made similar observations about left-wing parties. Artists talked about how they consequently amended their content and creative development both in terms of grant applications, pitches to commissioners and the content they made.

Harassment and censorship in the arts is not only confined to those with right wing opinions. Artists and cultural figures from minority communities such as Sam Smith[83] and Nadiya Hussain[84] have talked about the difficulties they face in being harassed and subjected to hate crime. A more systematic review of harassment and censorship in the arts sector, and its intersection with cancel culture, could shed light on the extent to which these high-profile examples are representative of broader trends.

**1.2.6. Harassment and censorship in schools**

Abuse and harassment of teachers tends to originate from parents or those who claim to speak on their behalf. A recent survey found that one in seven teachers (15 per cent) report that parents are aggressive with them on at least a monthly basis[85]. A primary reason that teachers cite feeling 'professionally disempowered' is 'offensive behaviour from pupils, parents or colleagues not being tackled by management[86].

This picture is supported by a series of well-documented instances of harassment and intimidation on specific issues – for example, in a small number of British schools clashes over inclusive relationship and sex education, has led to noisy and often threatening protests outside school gates. The highest profile of these occurred in Birmingham targeting Anderton Park Primary School, over the school's teaching of LGBT+ inclusive relationships. The High Court heard that the protests were often noisy and disruptive, involved homophobic and intolerant chants, with some staff experiencing threats from protestors and others having to be treated

[79] Free speech in universities: What are the issues? Commons Library, 19th March 2021
[80] 'Culture of censorship' as arts workers fear backlash, Arts Professional, 20th February 2020. Self-selecting sample of 1,000 artists.
[81] Dave Chappelle show cancelled over transgender jokes controversy, BBC News, 21st July 2022
[82] Ricky Gervais Has Become The Man He Used To Mock, Forbes, 30th May 2022
[83] Sam Smith says they were 'spat at in the street' after coming out as non-binary, Evening Standard, 27th January 2023
[84] Nadiya Hussain talks about the racist abuse her kids suffer and handling it as a family, The Mirror, 7th March 2022
[85] YouGov, TeacherTrack_Spring22, 14th-26th April 2022, N=407
[86] Big Questions Survey 2022, NASUWT

for stress. Some of the most active instigators and ring leaders of these protests had no direct connection with the school, and the protests were found to be supported by a proscribed organisation[87].

The Commission for Countering Extremism found evidence that these school protests were supported by Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and other Islamist organisations, as well as organisations such as Stop RSE – concluding that "certain religious fundamentalists have exploited the issue to entrench social division"[88]. The High Court found that the defendants in the Anderton School case had misunderstood, misinterpreted and sometimes grossly misrepresented what was being taught in the school and Birmingham City Council successfully obtained an injunction prohibiting certain protestors for demonstrating outside Anderton Park. The then HM Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, criticised the lack of "swift condemnation" from local and national political leaders and the lack of leadership in support of the headteacher, school and children[89].

Debates about striking the right balance between freedom of expression and respect for orthodox religious beliefs have continued across generations and contexts. However, more recently there have been greater concerns about harassment associated with accusations of blasphemy. There are several recent examples of local leaders citing so-called blasphemy laws (which do not exist in the UK) to put pressure on, and in some cases harass and intimidate, teachers and school leaders into making specific pastoral or curriculum decisions with real consequences – one teacher in Batley, for example, was in hiding for over a year following an incident in Batley Grammar School[90]. Four students in Wakefield were suspended from school after they unintentionally scuffed the Quran in early 2023 and these students were said to have received death threats[91]. The accusation of blasphemy is often associated with these more extreme examples of harassment. Accusations of blasphemy may also lead to self-censorship and limits on freedom of expression beyond schools. For example, in June 2022, noisy protests outside cinemas and the harassment of cinema staff led to the film *Lady of Heaven* being pulled by certain cinemas following concerns it was blasphemous[92].

**1.2.7. Harassment and censorship trends across institutions in the UK**

In contrast to the uneven evidence available on harassment and censorship at a society-wide level, at the institutional level it is possible to identify rising levels of harassment and censorship pointing to broader impacts on cohesion and democratic norms. While the nature of the evidence reviewed makes it difficult to identify larger trends, in many institutions including parliament, local councils, newsrooms and universities, evidence points to increased levels of harassment that in turn lead to self-censorship.

As previous research by More in Common has suggested [93] harassment and censorship are taking place in institutions which play a vital role in our civil life – parliament, journalism, and the media, schools, academia and universities. These institutions are key to Britain's democratic health as a nation, and are experiencing heightened conflict, public distrust, harassment, and different forms of censorship.

[87] Challenging Hateful Extremism, Commission for Countering Extremism, October 2019
[88] Challenging Hateful Extremism, Commission for Countering Extremism, October 2019
[89] Ofsted boss criticises government for inaction over protests against LGBT+ equality lessons, Independent, 21st January 2020
[90] A year on from Prophet Muhammad Batley school row and teacher still in hiding as family 'at risk', Yorkshire Live, 25th March 2022
[91] Police speak to child about death threats after Quran damaged at Wakefield school, BBC News, 5th March 2023
[92] Why is The Lady Of Heaven so controversial? Protests across the UK and petition signed by 120,000 people lead to film being pulled from some cinemas, Sky News, 9th June 2022
[93] Ibid, More in Common, Democratic Repair (October 2021) and Dousing the Flames (July 2021)

## 1.3. Group level

In addition to exploring harassment and censorship at a societal and institutional level, our review also explored harassment and self-censorship at the group level – including groups that experience harassment and censorship because of their identities (often protected characteristic identities) or because of the views they may hold.

In many cases, harassment of these groups presents as 'us-versus-them' or 'in-group/out-group' dynamics. Research by More in Common and others have highlighted that these dynamics are particularly likely to come to the fore during times of economic or social insecurity and when both trust in institutions and communities is low. There is also evidence that certain individuals seek to exploit such insecurities to actively direct ill feeling towards minority groups as a 'source of threat'[94]. As such while the volume and type of harassment these groups are subjected to are often different, the dynamics of conflict and polarisation can play out in very similar ways.

This section explores the key evidence on the scale of that harassment and censorship faced by different sub-groups of the public in the UK today. As with assessing the levels of harassment and censorship more generally, it remains a challenge at the specific group level to assess the trends on harassment and censorship with certainty due to significant data gaps.

### 1.3.1. Harassment and censorship of young women and girls

Abuse faced by women in institutions is also reflected in harassment faced by women and girls more broadly in society. The Girls Attitudes Survey (2021) from Girlguiding[95] provides an overview of the harassment faced by girls online and offline that is not captured in national crime surveys. 23 per cent of girls aged 11-16 years old experience harassment, rising to 33 per cent of girls aged 17-21 years. This is likely to include specific experiences of sexual harassment which, while outside the scope of this review, is a significant element of harassment facing young women and girls.

A quarter (26 per cent) of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 do not feel safe when they are online, while over half (53 per cent) of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 do not feel safe when they're outside on their own. These perceptions of not feeling safe outside are highest in the North of England (58 per cent) and Midlands (57 per cent) compared to 51 per cent in London and the South. Those in areas of high deprivation are more likely than those in areas of low deprivation to say they do not feel safe outside on their own (57 per cent compared to 49 per cent). This highlights further the ways that the threat of harassment and subsequent self-censorship extends beyond freedom of speech, to behaviour and personal freedom. These themes extend to adult women more generally, as discussed in a recent More in Common report[96].

### 1.3.2. Harassment and censorship of trans people

The increase in attention directed at transgender and gender identity debates in the UK has coincided with a rise in evidence of harassment faced by trans activists. Annual hate crime statistics show a rise in hate crime against transgender people in recent years – most recently with a year-on-year increase of 56 per cent to 4,355 hate crimes[97] in the year to March 2022. These figures should be seen in the context of the longstanding under-reporting by trans people. It is difficult to know the extent to which such increases reflect a substantive increase in incidence, or a greater number of people reporting such incidents.

Similar themes are illustrated by the charity Galop[98] which found that four in five trans respondents had experienced some form of transphobic hate crime (of a physical or threatened physical nature for one in four).

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[94] Karen Stenner, The Authoritarian Dynamic. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
[95] Girls' Attitudes Survey 2022, Girlguiding
[96] Where are the police? Britons' attitudes to crime, anti-social behaviour and the police, More in Common, January 2023
[97] Hate crime, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022
[98] Bradley, C. (2020) Transphobic Hate Crime Report 2020, London: Galop. Self-selecting survey, N=241 where over half respondents were trans/had trans history.

Most described this abuse as invasive questions and verbal abuse coming from: strangers (50 per cent), gender critical activists (50 per cent), their family (40 per cent), another member of the 'LGBTQIA+ community' (40 per cent). When asked about the impact of this abuse on their daily lives, the most common answer was about self-censoring: "I am less able to share my opinions". Qualitative research found a prevailing sense that the abuse was leading people to be more careful in what they were saying[99].

**1.3.3. Harassment and censorship of lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people**

Similar trends emerge for many lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people. Home Office statistics indicate that hate crimes related to people's sexual orientation have increased by 41% to 26,152 in the year end to March 2022 – a higher annual increase than previous years[100]. Again, these hate crimes statistics may not be fully representative of harassment faced by LGBT people, both because of the historic under-reporting of hate crimes, and the additional point that hate crime statistics only capture a portion of all harassment faced by communities because of their sexual orientation. Stonewall reports that greater awareness of hate crime and efforts to improve recording of hate crime have also likely to have contributed to this recorded increase over time[101].

There is evidence that this harassment or fear thereof, has led to significant self-censorship among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Stonewall's Work Report finds more than a third of LGBT staff (35 per cent) have hidden the fact that they are LGBT at work for fear of discrimination, one in ten black, Asian and minority ethnic LGBT employees (10 per cent) reporting having been physically attacked by customers or colleagues in the last year, and nearly two in five bisexual people (38 per cent) aren't out to anyone at work[102].

**1.3.4. Harassment and censorship of gender-critical activists**

The polarising debates around gender identity in recent years have resulted in the harassment of people expressing views on these issues - for both trans rights activists and gender critical activists. The harassment and censorship faced by gender critical activists highlighted by the expert roundtable discussion points to the fact that harassment and censorship can be related to people's beliefs and opinions, as well as their identity or religion.

There is significant anecdotal evidence of harassment faced by groups of gender critical activists. One mechanism for that harassment highlighted by Sex Matters was that activists opposed to those who express gender critical views often targeted their use of third-party services. This makes it more difficult for gender critical campaigners to operate as an organisation. Barrister Allison Bailey sued her former chambers for discriminating against her on account of her gender-critical beliefs, but the crowdfunding platform she launched to fund her case was closed down by the platform provider following a campaign as it 'could be considered to promote hate, abuse or harassment towards a minority community'. Gender-critical activists report being no-platformed and disinvited to numerous events. In many cases, event organisers explained the reasons for withdrawing invitations citing complaints from their younger staff, fears around social media outrage and concerns about the potential losses of sponsorship[103].

In a university context, Kathleen Stock (who herself left the University of Sussex due to harassment about her stance on trans issues) in 2019 collated 28 detailed anonymous case studies of students and academics in the UK not being able to openly discuss or critique transgender issues[104]. Some key threads from those case studies include academics self-censoring gender-critical views to protect their careers, the chilling effect of disciplinary processes, direct instructions to not publicly express gender critical views, advice not to publish trans-related research, and being asked to withdraw from the editorship of journals after having defended gender-critical academic freedom.

**1.3.5. Harassment and censorship of Muslims**

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[99] Ibid, Galop, Transphobic Hate Crime Report 2020
[100] Hate crime, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022
[101] LGBT in Britain, Hate Crime and Discrimination, Stonewall, 2017
[102] LGBT in Britain - Work Report, Stonewall, 2018
[103] See summary of roundtable discussion, Annex B
[104] Are academics freely able to criticise the idea of 'gender identity' in UK Universities?, Kathleen Stock, Medium, July 2019

Government Hate Crime figures for the year ending March 2022 found that religious hate crime offences were more likely to be directed at Muslims than any other religious group. A total of 3,459 offences were recorded in the year to March 2022 – a slight decrease from the previous year. Overall, offences involving Muslims accounted for 42 per cent of all offences relating to a groups' faith.

Previous research from civil society organisations TellMAMA and Runnymede[105], found an increase in Islamophobic or anti-Muslim attacks/intimidation over time. For example, Runnymede recorded a 23.7 per cent increase in Islamophobic hate crime between 2015 and 2017.

Less evidence is available on the impact of this intimidation and abuse on censorship, but in a regional study carried out by TellMAMA exploring Islamophobia in North East England, more than half the Muslim respondents (57per cent) said they had altered their behaviour because of Islamophobia, particularly their appearance, awareness, and mobility[106].

**1.3.6. Harassment and Censorship of Jewish people**

Numerous data points suggest an increased level of harassment and antisemitic abuse being faced by Jewish communities in the UK today.

In the first half of 2022, the Community Safety Trust (CST) recorded 786 antisemitic incidents across the UK, the joint-fifth-highest total reported to CST in the January to June period of any year[107]. This was a decrease of 43 per cent from the first half of 2021; the highest comparable figure ever reported. This was attributed to be the result of an escalation in violence in Israel and Palestine during that period and Jewish people being targeted as a result. CST recorded 875 antisemitic incidents in the first half of 2020, 911 from January to June 2019, and 810 in the first six months of 2018.

Beyond data collected by the CST, other evidence points to the scale of antisemitic abuse and harassment in the UK today. Google search data analysis found an average of 170,000 Google searches for antisemitic content are made per year in the UK with 10 per cent of these searches involving violent language/intentions[108].

Taken together, this ongoing and growing level of harassment being felt in Jewish communities in the UK. The Campaign Against Anti-Semitism's 2021 Anti-Semitism Barometer found that 46 per cent of British Jews now avoid displaying outward signs of their Judaism in public – the highest figure recorded in their tracker polling since 2015[109].

During the period of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, the increase in antisemitic harassment and failure to tackle it attracted significant public attention[110]. An Equality and Human Rights Commission investigation into antisemitism during this period found "a culture within the Party which, at best, did not do enough to prevent antisemitism and, at worst, could be seen to accept it"[111]. This institutional antisemitism and tolerance of antisemitic harassment had a direct impact on participation in politics with several Jewish (and non-Jewish) MPs and Peers such as Luciana Berger and Louise Ellman leaving the party as a result, something that was replicated at the local government and membership level.

**1.3.7. Harassment and Censorship in Hindu Communities**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that harassment towards British Indians, has increased in the UK in recent years[112] reflecting increased tensions in particular between Hindu and Muslim communities originating in India and Pakistan. After violent clashes in Leicester last autumn between Hindus and Muslims, more than 180

[105] Parliamentary Briefing: Islamophobia Inquiry 2019, Runnymede Trust, 2019
[106] Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred in North East England, TellMAMA, June 2020
[107] Antisemitic Incidents January-June 2022, Community Safety Trust
[108] Stephens-Davidowitz, S. Hidden hate: What Google searches tell us about antisemitism today, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2019
[109] Antisemitism Barometer 2021, Campaign Against Anti-Semitism, 2021
[110] See summary of roundtable discussion, Annex B
[111] Investigation into the Labour Party, Equality and Human Rights Commission, January 2021
[112] Rise of anti-Indian racism, EDM (Early Day Motion)231: tabled on 22 June 2021

British Indian organisations warned that hatred towards the Hindu community was at "an all-time high, to the point where there has been open violence, intimidation, and abuse levelled at Hindus through physical assaults, harassment on social media, and most recently through soft targeting in schools and the workplace"[113]. Those concerns have been supported by research from the 1928 Institute, which found that 80 per cent of British Indian respondents had experienced prejudice as a result of their Indian identity over the past two years[114]. However, the paucity of data (both survey and official data) and the overlap between reports of "Hinduphobia" and assertions of Hindu Nationalist identity limits our assessment. While the concept of 'Hinduphobia' has been adopted by groups such as Hindu Matters in Britain[115], it is the subject of some contention[116] and has not yet been adopted by any official UK government body. The harassment and subsequent censorship by British Indians merit further examination and research going forward.

**1.3.8. Harassment and censorship of Christians**

Concerns about the harassment of Christians in public life have been highlighted in recent years, particularly in connection with Tim Farron, former leader of the Liberal Democrats and Kate Forbes, leadership candidate for the Scottish National Party. Both attracted criticism after they expressed beliefs about cultural values (such as same sex relationships and gender identity issues) with Forbes in particular suggesting this would affect how she would have voted on these issues at the time, and may legislate in future on similar issues. There is some also some anecdotal evidence of harassment of Christians on local community levels[117].

While the overall proportion of religious hate crime directed at Christians is relatively low (less than 10% of all recorded religious hate crimes) and this has remained relatively consistent in recent years, between 2021 and 2022, there was a forty percent increase in recorded hate crimes against Christians[118]. The Christian Institute warn against using the term 'religious persecution' to describe the experience of Christians in the UK[119], but instead suggest that a sliding scale of persecution exists from authoritarian regimes executing Christians to what they see in the UK, to being "being cursed at, hated, rejected, sacked"[120].

There is also evidence of some workplace self-censorship happening among practising Christians in the UK. Research carried out by D&I consultancy Pearn Kandola found that 82% of UK-based Christian employees who might normally wear religious dress or symbols do not do so at work, and 66% of those that do feel uncomfortable doing so[121].

**1.3.9. Intra-community harassment and censorship in the UK**

While much evidence on harassment and censorship at the group-level assumes that the drivers of specific harassment and censorship originates from outside the group, our review also identified many examples of intra-community harassment and censorship that can be especially intensive. Social psychologists report that groups with strong in-group identities often reinforce those identities by policing the boundaries of the group identity rigorously[122], and this is reflected in anecdotal evidence – for example:

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[113] UK: Hindu groups write to PM Liz Truss seeking protection post incidences of violence, Mint, 15th October 2022

[114] Identity, Political Representation & Policy Priorities, The British Indian Experience, The 1928 Institute. This data came from a survey of 1747 British Indians, recruited through social media platforms. While self-selecting samples are far less rigorous than standard representative polls, the overall methodology with a large sample size, data weighting, post-collection statistical checks, and supplementary 24 individual interviews and 11 focus groups – in addition to the regular difficulties of surveying groups who make up only a small percentage of the overall population, help to lend credibility to these findings.

[115] What is working definition of Hinduphobia?, Hindu Matters in Britain

[116] The APPG, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism, Feminist Dissent 2022, Issue 6

[117] Tumble: Christian minister fears harassment due to religion, February 2022

[118] Hate crime, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022

[119] Investigation: Are Christians in the UK persecuted? Premier Christianity, 25 May 2021

[120] Ibid, Premier Christianity

[121] Pearn Kandola Religion at Work: Experiences of Christian employees, 14th December 2022, N=523

[122] The Psychology of Authoritarian Populism: A Bird's Eye View, More in Common, June 2018

- **Ahmadiyya Muslims** – there is anecdotal evidence on the harassment faced by Ahmadiyya Muslims as has been explored by a 2020 APPG Inquiry[123] and a series of high-profile cases including the murder of Asad Shah, and leaflets calling for the death of Ahmadis at Stockwell Green Mosque in London[124]. This is backed up by qualitative academic research showing the peer-directed hostility experienced by Ahmadiyya Muslims[125].
- **Apostates** – a 2020 study found that apostates - a term used to describe those who once identified as religious but now cease to hold those beliefs – are far more likely to experience assaults than any other group of non-religious people. The study also identified the challenge of reporting harassment in intra-community contexts when perpetrators can often be close family members. Ex-Muslim apostates are especially likely to face abuse according to the study's comparison of people leaving the Muslim and Christian faiths, although it noted the difficulties in comparing the experiences of different sects within these religions[126]. Anecdotal evidence suggests similar trends may exist among ex-ultra-orthodox Jews from Charedi communities[127].

As with the trends across specific groups, it is difficult to assess the trends in intra-community harassment and censorship in the UK. However, it is clear that given the intensity of harassment and censorship of the two examples highlighted above that these dynamics can be very significant for those affected. Further evidence on the dynamics of intra community harassment and how best to effectively disrupt it would be beneficial.

**1.3.10 – Overall trends on harassment and censorship at group level**

The evidence explored in this section suggests higher levels of harassment and consequent self-censorship at the group-specific level. Groups such as British Muslims to Jewish communities, gender critical activists, Hindu communities, LGBT people and Christians communities' face outsized levels of harassment in their everyday lives and in some cases, this is leading to a self-censoring effect. Much more robust work is needed, however, to ascertain the trends across groups and over time.

[123] Suffocation of the Faithful, The Persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and the rise of international extremism, APPG for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, July 2020
[124] 'Kill Ahmadis' Leaflets Found In Stockwell Green Mosque In South London, Huffington Post, 11th April 2016
[125] Is anti-Ahmadiyya discrimination an issue in the British Muslim community?, September 2019
[126] Apostates as a Hidden Population of Abuse Victims, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, December 2021
[127] Ex-Ultra-Orthodox Jews: Coming out, Humanists UK

# Section 2 – The impact of harassment and censorship on British society

**The impact of harassment and censorship on rights, freedoms, democracy, social cohesion, and pluralism in the UK**

Recorded increases in incidents of harassment and censorship are part of a larger landscape of rising threats to pluralism and democratic values in the United Kingdom, and abroad. A climate in which difference between groups in society escalate into harassment and the suppression of people's freedoms is likely to be less able to navigate the complex challenges of a changing world, affecting the quality of governance, policy making, education, mental health, productivity, artistic expression and the protection of the rights of minorities. The dynamics of harassment and censorship in various institutions and across sub-groups pose significant challenges to democracy and cohesion in the UK.

Some of the most direct threats to participation in democratic life come from threats to politicians and journalists.

**Harassment faced by parliamentarians, political candidates and councillors is discouraging many from seeking election or re-election** – left unchecked this will undermine the representativeness of public life in the UK, limiting the range of views expressed and, diversity of candidates, willing to put them forward. That in turn leads to a narrower talent pool, weakening both the quality and legitimacy of decisions both at the local and national level. For example, the harassment of local councillors is likely to lead to decisions on services or issues such as planning and licensing being increasingly dictated by the loudest or most aggressive voices, rather than reflecting the breadth local opinions.[128] As outlined in section one, the Independent Committee on Standards in Public Life concluded its 2017 report saying: "the overwhelming view of parliamentary candidates who provided evidence to the Committee was that intimidation is already discouraging individuals from standing for public offices"[129]. The Local Government Association report that more than two thirds of councillors who will not stand at the next local election (around 18 per cent of current councillors) say that abuse and intimidation have played a role in their decision not to seek re-election.

**Harassment faced by journalists is causing around one in seven to self-censor as a result,** and in some cases drop stories. This undermines freedom of the press, cutting through the heart of journalistic and editorial independence (Binns, 2017). The Media Lawyers Association has highlighted impacts from the harassment and abuse facing journalists, including journalists, particularly women, choosing to publish without by-lines and journalists deciding to avoid whole topics or leave their newsrooms altogether[130].

As we've already outlined, this impact is pervasive across groups and institutions in Britain today – several examples are shown in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1: The impact of harassment and censorship on institutions and groups in British society**

| Group | Impact of harassment and self-censorship |
|---|---|

[128] Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy, Local Government Association, June 2022
[129] Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017
[130] Combatting Online Harassment and Abuse: A Legal Guide for Journalists in England and Wales, Media Lawyers Association, June 2021

| | |
|---|---|
| Academics and universities | Academic staff in the UK are more likely to self-censor (35.5 per cent agree) compared to their European counterparts (19.1 per cent EU average)[131] |
| Students | In a 2019 survey, fewer than 40 per cent of Leave-supporting students felt they could express views on Brexit in front of their classmates, compared to nearly 90 per cent of Remain supporters who felt comfortable expressing their views[132]. |
| Muslim communities | In a case-study in the North East of England, more than half of Muslim respondents (57 per cent) said they had altered their behaviour because of fear of discrimination, particularly their appearance, awareness, and mobility[133] |
| Jewish communities | 46 per cent of British Jews now avoid displaying outward signs of their Judaism in public – the highest figure recorded in the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism's tracker polling[134]. |
| Trans people | "I am less able to share my opinions" is the most common impact of trans people's daily life because of transphobic harassment[135] |
| Teenage girls | A quarter (26 per cent) of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 do not feel safe when they're online, while over half (53 per cent) do not feel safe when they're outside on their own[136]. |
| Artists | More than 80 per cent of the artists who responded to Arts Professional in 2020 agreed that "workers in the arts and cultural sector who share controversial opinions risk being professionally ostracised"[137]. |

However, the impact of harassment and self-censorship is not limited to those most directly involved in the democratic process or across minority communities in the UK. Each individual case of harassment and consequential self-censorship is an affront to British values. However, the impact goes beyond individuals, as More in Common has highlighted elsewhere[138]- harassment and censorship undermine pluralism and the health of British democracy suffers. If schools are not places where young people can be taught about the reality of modern Britain because of threats from extremist groups; if universities are not places which foster the free exchange of ideas because of an ideological monoculture; or if artistic and cultural expression are stymied for fear retaliation or ostracisation, then both the pluralism and democratic health of Britain suffers.

The literature identifies two particularly harmful effects from this institutional self-censorship:

**Silencing minority voices** – there is long-standing academic evidence suggesting that that harassment and self-censorship can contribute to a 'spiral of silence' (Neumann, 1974). People become reluctant to speak up about issues if their views are not shared by their friends, family, or colleagues. Recent studies have found that this social dynamic from pre-internet communications is widespread in our online world[139].

**Risks of further radicalising extremists –** 'The Censorship Effect' argues that censorship by online platforms can risk exacerbating the problem by forcing banned individuals onto alternative and less regulated platforms and feeding into long-suffering victimhood narratives[140]. This effect can, of course, also apply beyond tech platforms, but it is especially relevant because of the ease of moving into different online environments, such as the dark web. This highlights a difficult balancing act, since there are clear reasons for restricting certain form of hate speech. In discussing this challenge, the expert roundtable pointed to the need to balance the risk

[131] Karran, T., and Mallinson, L., Academic Freedom in the U.K.: Legal and Normative Protection in a Comparative Context, University and College Union, May 2017
[132] Simpson and Kaufmann, Academic freedom in the UK, November 2019
[133] Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hatred in North East England
[134] Antisemitism Barometer 2021, Campaign Against Anti-Semitism, 2021
[135] Bradley, C. (2020) Transphobic Hate Crime Report 2020, London: Galop.
[136] Girls' Attitudes Survey 2022, Girlguiding
[137] 'Culture of censorship' as arts workers fear backlash, Arts Professional, 2020
[138] Tryl, L., Burns, Burns. C., Dixon, T. Juan-Torres, M. (2021): Democratic Repair, More in Common
[139] E Dubois, Swarz J, Self-censorship, Polarization, and the 'Spiral of Silence' on Social Media, 2018
[140] The Censorship Effect, an analysis of the consequences of social media censorship and a proposal for an alternative moderation model, Ottman, Change Minds, October 2022

of silencing extreme voices with the potential harm caused by individuals who use their platforms to direct and incite abuse and harassment at others[141].

**Impact on social cohesion**

More in Common has documented the negative impact of crime and anti-social behaviour on social cohesion and the social fabric of communities more broadly[142], with focus group conversations and polling showing that social cohesion is weaker whenever people feel less safe in their communities as they feel compelled to pull up their own personal drawbridge[143]. Harassment is no exception from this rule – when either increases, people feel less safe, and communities become less cohesive. Self-censorship on the other hand is likely to make people feel less able to 'have a say' on issues in their community/country, fuelling alienation and a sense of victimhood contributing to social divisions[144].

More in Common's research has also identified that harassment and censorship make it more difficult for society to navigate change and as such increase the likelihood of inter-group conflict. While generally at the more mild level than many of the incidents discussed in this report, some of these effects are reported in connection with Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI). More in Common[145] polling in December 2022, found almost a quarter (23 per cent) who had taken part in DEI training in recent years felt pressured to speak a certain way and had avoided asking questions on which they wanted further information. This feeling of being 'frightened' to ask questions for fear of backlash also emerges from focus group research highlighting the risk that rather than fostering a culture of understanding, DEI initiatives can have unanticipated negative effects.

Harassment contributes to a vicious cycle of increased conflict and increased threat perception in society, with 'us-versus-them' dynamics undermining shared identities and deepening social fractures. People feel more threatened and less safe, which in turn increases their hostility towards groups perceived as the source of threats and reduces their willingness to participate in community life - especially those who are more averse to conflict.

## The impact of harassment and censorship on free speech in the UK and the legal balance between protected and threatening speech

Increasing harassment and censorship at a societal, institutional and group level also work to undermine protections afforded to freedom of speech. Striking the right balance between protected and threatening speech is a complex legal, political, and cultural debate in the UK that are beyond the scope of this review. However, insights from the expert roundtable and More in Common's research insights into the public's views on free speech offer some valuable starting points.

**The legal framework for protected speech and threatening speech**

The Equality and Human Rights Commission sets out guidance on how legislation makes the distinction between protected speech and threatening speech which leads to harassment.

Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights (and the Human Rights Act 1998, Article 10 which applied the convention in UK law) provides a right to freedom of expression in the UK. The legal framework on protected speech provides that this right is a qualified right which can be subject to "formalities, conditions,

[141] Annex B, Roundtable Discussion
[142] Kimaram, A., Tryl, L., Surmon, T., Burns, C., Where are the Police? Britons' attitudes to crime, anti-social behaviour and the police, January 2023, More in Common
[143] Tryl, L., Burns, C. Dixon, T. (2021): Dousing the Flames: How leaders can better navigate cultural change in 2020s Britain. More in Common
[144] Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T., Kimaram, A. (2020): Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain. More in Common
[145] Polling currently unpublished at time of publication, N=2000, nationally representative sample, December 2022

restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society"[146]. The Law Commission explain that criminal offences which qualify this right cannot be "too vague or ambiguous", must be a proportionate pursuit of a legitimate aim, such as the prevention of crime or protection of others' rights, and will be easier to justify if such qualifications protect people from harm[147].

Several laws allow for protected speech under the Human Rights Act to be limited in the cases of harassment:

- *Public Order Act 1986* - In the criminal law, under the Public Order Act 1986, protected speech can be limited when it causes a person harassment, alarm of distress either intentionally (s. 4A) or unintentionally (s.5.). These offences are subject to two defences whether the conduct was reasonable, and whether there was a reasonable belief that the content would be heard or seen by person(s) outside of the place they were made.
- *Communications Act 2003 (CA 2003) and Malicious Communications Act 1988 (MC 1988)* – The Law Commission explain that these acts cover harassment on online platforms. 127(1) CA 2003 makes it an offence for a person to send a communication over a public electronic communications network that is grossly offensive, indecent, obscene, or menacing. The Malicious Communications Act 1988 prohibits communications that contain threats or are grossly offensive or indecent. Under this act, the communications must be sent "to another" which restricts its application to public fora.
- *Equality Act 2010* – The Equality Act 2010, s26 provides further protections against some harassing behaviour. Whether the type of speech leading to harassment is lawful or not depends on the context. As the EHRC advice states, in some instances, some views are lawful to express in some contexts, but unlawful to express in other contexts such as the workplace[148].

The legal framework is more complex in its application to the responsibilities of public service providers who can be held liable for harassment of their service, members, guests, or even in their role as employers under s.29 Equality Act 2010. The expert roundtable explored the challenges faced by Higher Education Providers in exercising this duty under the Equality Act, alongside additional duties to promote freedom of expression (S6, Human Rights Act 1998) and the duty to secure freedom of speech within the law under s.43 (1) Education Act 1986. The Office for Students has said that there is a risk that universities are not striking the appropriate balance with their duties to protect free speech under the Education Act 198 and the Human Rights Act, and their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. The precise balance of these responsibilities in the university context is likely to be clarified by the current Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

Exploring how to best strike the balance between protected and threatening speech, the Law Commission's recent review of hate crime legislation concluded that the freedom of expression clauses in the Public Order Act 1986 help to clarify the extent of the law and avoid a 'chilling effect' on freedom of speech. The Law Commission[149] recommends retaining freedom of expression clauses on religion and sexual orientation and adding new protections for expression targeted at cultural practices, individual countries and their governments, discussion of immigrations, citizenship and asylum, and the protection for gender critical views and the language used to express them. The extension of these legal protections should be accompanied by clear and practical guidance on how these beliefs should be protected in practical settings such as schools, workplaces, and other institutions. One of the gaps highlighted in the expert roundtable was the need for better guidance for a range of institutions on how to protect freedom of belief as part of broader safeguards on freedom of expression. Several participants anticipated that freedom of belief exemptions will take a more prominent place in debates going forward.

The Law Commission recommends reform of the communications offences under the Communications Act 2003 and Malicious Communications Act 1988 with a new offline and online harms-based offence, a new offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm; a specific cyberslacking offence, and an offence for

[146] Human Rights Act, Article 10(2)
[147] Modernising Communications Offences, A final report, Law Commission, Law Com No 399
[148] Freedom of expression, A guide for higher education providers and students' unions in England and Wales, February 2019, Equality and Human Rights Commission
[149] Hate crime laws: Final report, Law Com No. 402, Law Commission, 2021

sending knowingly false communications, threatening communications, and making hoax calls to the emergency services, to replace section 127(2) of the CA 2003[150].

These two major reviews by the Law Commission should form the foundation for further work in this area to strike the right legal balance between protected and threatening speech in both online and offline contexts. Our expert roundtable also recommended that any legal changes in this area – whether in specific contexts like Higher Education or more broadly – should be accompanied by clear, practical, and actionable guidance on how the legal framework operates in practice and can be applied by decision-makers.

**How the public balance protected speech and threatening speech**

Public opinion research provides useful insights into the balance between protected speech and threatening speech. More in Common has conducted extensive quantitative and qualitative research with the British public on issues related to freedom of speech and expression, and this has found that most people take a more nuanced view than public debates might suggest. (Tryl et al, 2021):

- A clear majority (54 per cent) agree that it is more important to protect free speech than to regulate what people say to avoid offending groups. This reflects the widely held view that the right to speak your mind is a democratic right that society has a responsibility to protect.
- More than seven in ten Britons are concerned about hate speech (71 per cent) while similar numbers are worried that people get too easily offended nowadays (79 per cent).
- Britons think that political correctness is a problem (71 per cent), but more than three quarters also believe that it is important to protect people from dangerous and hateful speech (77 per cent).

It's clear from this polling that when considering the tensions between protected and threatening speech the British public search for balance, not absolutes. While it might be frustrating for those who want clear answers one way or the other, the reality is that the majority of people do not think in binary terms – the setting, the intention, the precise views, and the overall context matters as to whether they would consider something to fall under threatening or protected speech.

[150] Modernising Communications Offences, A final report, Law Commission, Law Com No 399

# Section 3 – Tackling harassment and censorship in British society

Along with exploring the scale of harassment and self-censorship in the UK, and its impact on British values and institutions, the third pillar of this review explores 'what works' at tackling harassment and censorship in the UK.

Similar problems as with finding evidence on the level of trends in harassment and self-censorship emerge in concluding what works in tackling harassment and self-censorship at a society-wide level. There is however more evidence available on tackling specific types of harassment and censorship at an institutional or group level. In addition to the academic evidence reviewed, the expert roundtable proposed several recommendations for tackling harassment.

**Improved data collection**

The relative paucity of reliable and high-quality evidence on what works in tackling harassment and abuse not only makes it difficult to assess levels and trends in harassment, but also make it difficult to tackle it. As such, at the heart of any strategy for tackling self-censorship and harassment must be new channels and approaches to data collection that can close existing gaps. The expert roundtable suggested three areas that would benefit from better data collection:

- Experiences of harassment that don't meet criminal thresholds and which, by their day-to-day nature, are unlikely to be reported or captured by existing official surveys.
- Better work to understand inter and intra group dynamics on harassment, how this harassment plays out, which groups are most vulnerable and who is and isn't reporting harassment.
- The development and adoption of an official definition of harassment to provide more coherence to the data collection on harassment across the board. This definition should balance the competing concerns about accurately capturing the dynamics of harassment in the UK and the relative merits of more objective metrics or subjective experiences.
- Deeper exploration of self-censorship, in particular survey approaches that capture the full spectrum of self-censorship.

The expert roundtable also felt that the Community Safety Trust is a particularly effective example of a service that offers monitoring of and support to those in the Jewish Community facing harassment. Consideration should be given to whether similar models could be applied to harassment more broadly.

**Tackling harassment and self-censorship at a societal level**

The evidence suggests that there are a series of principles and priorities that should be applied across efforts to effectively tackle harassment and self-censorship at a general level.

- **Contact-based approaches:** The Equality and Human Rights Commission Report[151] assessed 24 evaluations of 18 interventions aiming to reduce or prevent discrimination – concluding that the most effective interventions used some form of contact between groups. Similarly, the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER)[152] advise that social cohesion work should draw on contact theory when developing initiatives. CRER also recommend that interventions should create spaces for genuine understanding rather than attitude or behaviour policing and ensuring that the leadership structures in each initiative are relatable to community members.

[151] Prejudice and unlawful behaviour: Exploring levers for change, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016
[152] Fostering Good Relations in Scotland Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, Developing Community Cohesion through Public Policy, Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER), May 2021

- **Place-based approach**: Hope Not Hate[153] called for towns-focused regeneration which shifts the focus from responding to manifestations of resentment to treating its causes – categorising good public transport, secure jobs, and decent housing as social cohesion issues. This aligns with More in Common's research which concludes that successful execution of the levelling up agenda has the potential to reduce intra/inter-community tensions, harassment and strengthen social cohesion across Britain[154].
- **Awareness raising and protections:** The expert roundtable concluded that greater education, awareness, and information campaigns would help to tackle harassment and censorship across the UK. However, these campaigns should take care to avoid having a chilling effect on freedom of expression and should sit alongside DEI interventions that are evidence based and which create the space for people to ask questions and raise concerns. The roundtable concluded that the balance between tackling harassment and protecting speech would be achieved better with strong enforcement of employment protections for freedom of belief and more guidance from the EHRC on these issues.
- **Consistent and proportional enforcement:** The expert roundtable also identified the need for more thoughtful and consistent action towards the perpetrators of harassment – avoiding disproportionate responses to ignorant mistakes but taking tougher action against those engaging in intentional harassment to drive censorship. The roundtable also felt that more work was needed to develop better sanctions against perpetrators. Given the expensive and impractical nature of defamation action, the new complaints system for higher education proposed in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill should provide a route to more effective, consistent and proportional enforcement in the university context at the very least.
- **Effective evaluation**: What Works? 'Eight principles for meaningful evaluation of anti-prejudice work' outlines an eight-principle framework for evaluating anti-prejudice projects to establish the best conditions for exploring 'what works' in this field of work[155].
- **Avoid American-style framings of the issue**: More in Common (Tryl et al, 2021) find that when it comes to so-called culture wars and debates, leaders should not accept the way that debates are often framed in shorthand reporting and in particular should reject American style framings. This applies to harassment and self-censorship where the context in Britain is markedly different to the US context, particularly in relation to race. This theme was discussed in the expert roundtable - here participants felt that better explanation of how context, laws and guidance differ in the UK to the US would make tackling harassment easier.
- **More concerted efforts to tackle online harassment**: There is also a growing body of evidence on what works in tackling online harassment and self-censorship. The Online Safety Bill currently making its way through Parliament will shape the approach to effectively countering harassment and self-censorship going forward. Given the shape of the Bill's regulatory framework is not yet set, we have limited our exploration of Online Safety Bill related literature. The expert roundtable however expressed hopes that the conclusion of Online Safety Bill debates would see more decisive action from social media and tech companies on harassment.
- **Legal approaches** – The Law Commission[156] recommends retaining freedom of expression clauses on religion and sexual orientation and adding new protections for expression targeted at cultural practices, individual countries and their governments, discussion of immigrations, citizenship and asylum, and the protection for gender critical views and the language used to express them. The extension of these legal protections should be accompanied by clear and practical guidance on how these beliefs should be protected in practical settings such as schools, workplaces, and other institutions.

## Tackling harassment and self-censorship by institution

[153] Hopeful Towns, Hope Not Hate, 2020
[154] Tryl, L., Burns. C., Everyday Levelling Up, More in Common, January 2022
[155] What works? Eight principles for meaningful evaluation of anti-prejudice work, Equality and Human Rights Commission, November 2017
[156] Hate crime laws: Final report, Law Com No. 402, Law Commission, 2021

**Everyday institutions**

More in Common's work has identified that there are gaps in supporting everyday institutions such as schools and workplaces in navigating challenging issues like harassment and censorship – and more broadly dealing with cultural change and culture wars. As Ofsted and the Commission on Counter Extremism identified, a key factor in allowing harassment and intimidation towards Birmingham school teachers to persist was because of a failure by local and national politicians to support the school.

More in Common's work (Tryl et al, 2021) has highlighted that public institutions need to be supplied with clear guidance when competing values and rights are in play. Local and national leaders need to support these institutions (and champion good practice) in balancing different claims.

These conclusions were endorsed by the expert roundtable where the need for more courageous political leadership to tackle those guilty of harassment was seen as vital. The group made clear this leadership should apply even when it might not be politically expedient – for instance if those engaged in harassment are influential community figures or representatives of faith groups. The role of independent regulators who are able to 'speak truth to power' were seen as crucial here, with Ofsted cited as an example of one of few public facing organisations that took seriously its role to challenge those engaging in harassment of educational settings, and for performing their role in preparing children for life in modern Britain.

In addition to this work supporting everyday institutions, there are some further elements of good practice in tackling harassment and censorship that could be applied beyond the institutions they already operate in.

**Journalism and the Media**

A range of guidance and tools are available to help journalists navigate this increasingly hostile environment of harassment and self-censorship:

- The Media Lawyers Association developed a step-by-step legal guide[157] for journalists in England and Wales when facing online harassment and abuse including legal remedies and steps to ensure the safety of journalists before a problem arises, when a problem arises (including keeping evidence and sharing information), blocking and muting harassing accounts, making complaints to online forums and taking legal action.
- A 2020 Panel by the International Press Institute[158] also explored how different newsrooms navigate increasing harassment by building formal and informal routes for staff to come forward, peer-to-peer support networks, and thoughtful strategies for dealing with online abuse.
- The News Media Association[159] highlighted that local police forces now include a media liaison officer to deal with threats and abuse faced by journalists. This model has the potential to be extended to other groups who are particularly at risk of harassment.

**Parliament and Local Government**

A range of interventions have been aimed at tackling harassment in politics – in many cases, tackling harassment will be the first step to reducing self-censorship among public figures.

- Political parties are doing more to tackle harassment and censorship within their own ranks. The Labour Party is currently implementing the reforms outlined by the EHRC to their antisemitism complaints system[160]. Separate processes are underway to tackle Islamophobia within the Conservative party[161]. However, beyond these high-profile instances, political parties should do more

[157] Combatting Online Harassment and Abuse: A Legal Guide for Journalists in England and Wales, Media Lawyers Association, June 2021
[158] What should journalists and newsrooms do when facing online abuse? International Press Institute, 2020
[159] New Report Warns UK Press Freedom at Risk, News Media Association, 29th April 2021
[160] Keir Starmer responds to EHRC announcement
[161] PM's ethics adviser investigates Tory MP Nus Ghani's Islamophobia claim

to design and implement proper codes of conduct for online and offline behaviour that extend to both candidates and members.

- There are a range of technological tools being developed to help politicians deal with online harassment and abuse. ParityBOT was designed to detect abusive tweets towards women candidates standing for election and responded with positive messages – this has been rolled out at recent elections in Canada, New Zealand, and the USA[162].
- The Local Government Association has outlined a series of recommendations in their 'Debate not Hate' report including clarifying that councillors can withhold their addresses from the public register, calling for more consistent support for councillors from the police (mirroring their support towards MPs), and further expansion of the civility in public life programme[163].

**Universities**

Suissa and Sullivan (2022)[164] set out a series of recommendations for how universities can balance their freedom of speech and equality obligations more effectively and in doing so, better tackle harassment and censorship on campuses across the country.

These recommendations include:

- Prohibiting political lobby groups from shaping policy or providing training
- Educating staff and students on academic freedom and the value of productive disagreement,
- Better oversight of equality, diversity, and inclusion departments
- Ensuring that commitment to free speech does not constitute defence of harassment, including new guidance and training on online harassment
- Reduced reliance on temporary, short-term contracts to avoid a climate where academics are worried to speak out or express different views for fear of the impact on their future prospects.
- Universities supporting the right to free speech and thought of academics and students under attack

## Tackling harassment and self-censorship by sub-group

Across the evidence reviewed[165] on harassment and censorship facing specific sub-groups and protected characteristic groups, there are a series of consistent themes on what works on support, prosecution, and prevention – particularly when applying the group specific lens.

- **Support** – many advocacy organisations for minority groups call for more investment in supporting victims of harassment both generally and to avoid censorship in the event of harassment. This recommended support takes a variety of forms – from group-specific support groups to awareness raising campaigns on how these groups experience harassment and censorship in their daily lives.
- **Prosecution** – a second theme across the literature (and in our expert roundtable) focused on how we can better prosecute harassment and censorship. A series of ways are suggested on how to do this from the police improving how they deal with harassment faced by groups with protected characteristics (extending pilots such as the journalist's liaison officers[166]), more training for police on how to deal with complex cases of harassment and censorship, targeted action to encourage people to report instances of harassment, and a more concerted effort to pursue and prosecute perpetrators of harassment.
- **Prevention** – the final cross-cutting theme focused on better training in schools and workplaces and more robust and inclusive policies and procedures to help avoid harassment (and censorship) in the first instance.

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[162] 'ParityBOT' uses AI to combat negative tweets toward female candidates, Global News, 27th September 2019

[163] Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy, Local Government Association, June 2022

[164] How can universities promote academic freedom? Insights from the front line of the gender wars, Impact, November 2022

[165] Fostering Good Relations in Scotland Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, Developing Community Cohesion through Public Policy, Hopeful Towns, Hope Not Hate, 2020, among others.

[166] National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, DCMS, March 2021

# Conclusion

Despite an increase in anecdotal reports of harassment and consequent self-censorship in the public sphere and particularly online, the evidence base on their extent, diffusion and trends is limited.

However, the paucity of cross-sectional evidence should not be a reason to assume that harassment and censorship are not happening, nor that they are not a serious threat to social cohesion and the health of our democracy. Based on what evidence is available, some one in ten people appear to be experiencing some form harassment in any six-month period. We also know that number is likely to be higher among minority groups, women, and those with more controversial political or ideological views. A range of organisations also find themselves in the cross hairs of harassment and abuse –as vocal ideological or religious minorities attempt to silence opposing viewpoints or to impose their world view onto public institutions.

The first step in tackling this harassment and self-censorship is to get a better handle on levels of incidence and trends over time. The subjective nature of some elements of harassment and the challenges identified measuring self-censorship make such data collection difficult. However, the government should commission a range of experimental survey approaches to collecting this data, with the view of building a series of cross-checking data points on harassment and self-censorship and identifying hotspots for further intervention. More thought should also be given to how models of best practice in reporting instances of harassment from organisations like the Community Safety Trust, or the model of police journalism liaison officers could be adopted more widely.

Beyond data collection and reporting, perhaps the most important theme identified in this review in tackling or condoning harassment and self-censorship is the importance of institutional leadership. In examples as diverse as gender critical academics being driven out their jobs to schools being pressured to stop talking about same-sex parents, it was the absence of strong institutional leadership that allowed this harassment and censorship to persist. Institutional leaders, from politicians to regulators to vice-chancellors should recognise the deleterious impact that allowing harassment to go unchecked, or worse acquiescing to the demands of the loudest voices, is having. Instead, leaders need to act and ensure there are robust, proportional and clear consequences for the perpetrators of harassment.

Alongside this clear policies, and better education and training could help to diffuse both harassment and self-censorship, but such forums need to be places that people feel genuinely able to express their views and to ask questions. DEI training and anti-harassment policies should not become a further route for silencing legitimate minority opinions. As such these interventions should be evidence based, rather than adopted uncritically from campaign groups. The literature suggests that one of the best forms of intervention are in the form of contact-based approaches. More thought should be given as part of the wider social cohesion review as to how best to increase the use of these approaches in educational settings and workplaces.

Some of the most complex examples of harassment and self-censorship that this review has identified are when the direction appears to be two-way. The most prominent case of that is in the current debate about gender identity and sex-based rights. Both those who are trans, and gender critical activists report high levels of harassment from the other group (and those who side with them in wider society), sometimes with severe consequences such as the loss of employment and livelihood. This speaks to the tone and manner in which we debate and discuss issues of social change and competing rights – all those involved, from parliamentarians to advocacy groups, would do well to model an approach that allows strongly held views to be expressed respectfully.

It is easy to dismiss harassment and self-censorship, especially in public life as the rough and tumble of politics. But when elected representatives are too scared to seek re-election and journalists fear pursuing public interest stories for fear of harassment and abuse, the effect on democratic life is a chilling one. But beyond politics and the media, harassment and self-censorship have an equally corrosive effect if universities fail to challenge group think, artists feel afraid to express themselves or people of faith feel unable to display symbols of their faith. In short, harassment and self-censorship strike at the heart of what it means to be a cohesive, liberal and open society, identifying and tackling both should be the goal of everyone involved in public and civic life.

# Appendix 1 – Methodology

**Review Questions**
This rapid evidence review was question-led, focusing on five questions proposed by More in Common and refined in conjunction with the Office of the Independent Advisor on Social Cohesion. The five review questions are:

- *Measuring the scale of harassment and self-censorship in the UK – by how much, if at all, is it increasing? Under what conditions, if any, is it leading to self-censorship?*
- *What groups in particular are more affected by harassment and self-censorship (e.g., women, minority communities, socially conservative voices)?*
- *What impact is this change in levels of harassment having on rights, freedoms, democracy, social cohesion, and pluralism?*
- *What works in effectively countering harassment and why?*
- *How do we better clarify the distinction between protected speech and threatening speech?*

**Search strategy**
The search strategy was be designed to identify relevant academic and grey literature published between January 2015 and March 2023. Electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR and Google Search were used, alongside individual searches of a list of civil society organisations, group-specific organisations, campaign groups and think tanks who've done work in this area. We kept the list of documents reviewable open throughout the duration of the project and added to it when identifying additional relevant literature in footnotes and bibliographies.

We used general search terms such as "harassment in the UK" "censorship in the UK" "cancel culture in the UK" "no platforming in the UK" "online harassment in the UK" and "self-censorship in the UK". We then applied these broader framings to the group and institution specific levels that we sought to explore in this report.

**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**
In terms of inclusion/exclusion criteria, we took a prioritise review/deprioritise review for what was included in our academic and grey literature review. Priority was given to literature which (a) was published between January 2015 and March 2023 (though relevant earlier literature was also included) (b) reported on primary data (c) focused on the scale/nature of harassment/censorship in the UK (d) could be considered on first inspection as a reputable source.

**Data Extraction, Synthesis and Quality Assessment**
More in Common's researchers extracted the data from the sources, took notes on the main thesis and evidence points of the arguments discussed in each source that were relevant to the broader purposes of our review, and made an assessment about the reliability of the data. For studies framed 'very useful' or 'somewhat useful', More in Common's researchers wrote a synthesis of the literature subsequently used in the development of the arguments of this report – we built the synthesis around the three major sections of this report – the scale of harassment and censorship, its impact on British society and what can be done to tackle it.

A list of all the sources reviewed as part of this rapid evidence review is available in Annex 3.

# Appendix 2 – Expert Roundtable Synthesis

As part of More in Common's Rapid Evidence Review on Harassment and Censorship in the UK, we convened a roundtable of experts and practitioners to present a synthesis of our evidence and gain insights and feedback into our review on the scale of harassment and censorship in the UK, it's impact on our democracy and social cohesion, and what can work effectively to tackle harassment and censorship in the UK today. This roundtable was held under Chatham House rules and included a variety of experts from a range of contexts from universities and schools to activist groups, elected representatives, civil servants, and charity leaders.

Key insights included:

**Clear challenges around understanding the scale of harassment and censorship in the UK today**

- One major challenge identified was the definitional challenge. More in Common presented the subjective definitions of harassment and censorship (following much of the survey research in this field), but alternative definitions are also available including the Equality Act's definition of harassment which includes an objective 'reasonableness' test. When considering broader trends, the definition is likely to distort figures and trends one way or another.
- Other participants talked about harassment as existing on a continuum. There was an acknowledgement that in some cases there will always be shades of grey when it comes to determine what is and what is not harassment, but drawing this line can be made easier by responding to clear black and white examples of harassment.
- Another challenge around measuring the scale of harassment is that in many contexts (particularly in institutional contexts such as politics and the media) a certain level of harassment has been normalised which can subsequently distort figures.
- There was concern by some participants that increases in very extreme levels of harassment (for example resulting in people having to leave their jobs or their homes) was not being picked up in the broader harassment research. Participants felt that this was driven both by the research design creating data gaps, but also low levels of reporting due to the intra-community nature of some of the more extreme cases of harassment where there is intense pressure from fundamentalists or extremists within communities.
- Some participants talked about not ignoring the harm of high-volume low-level harassment, as well as lower volume more extreme level of harassment.
- While much of the focus on harassment is what happens online, some participants felt that we ought not to forget harassment which happens in the public square as well.

**Concern that some current anti-harassment measures were being used to censor those with different views**

- Several participants shared concerns about how an overly broad definition of harassment could risk reinforcing censorship of people with different views – sharing examples of how anti-harassment laws were being used against gender critical activists speaking about their beliefs which are lawfully protected under the Equality Act.

**There was broad concern about the significant data gaps that exist across this area of harassment and censorship**

- This was not only in terms of the incidence rate of harassment and censorship and the need for stronger longitudinal data in this area to track trends, but the need to better track more extreme cases of harassment, and the data gaps extending to how harassment and censorship is handled, attitudes towards reporting, and people having confidence in the processes and institutions whenever they report cases of harassment and censorship.

**The debate about harassment and censorship in a university context is a complex one**

- A significant part of our roundtable discussion focused on how issues of harassment and censorship play out in the university context. Several participants called for a more constructive tone to this debate to help better navigate the complexity of this issue.
- The key challenge for universities that several participants identified was the overlapping duties to promote free speech and academic freedom on one hand, and protect minority groups and promote safe, inclusive campuses on the other hand. Some shared concerns about the framing of this issues as an issue of harassment versus equality – given that in many recent cases, the context for this issue has been on gender critical issues which is a belief protected under equality legislation.

- The current 'Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill' was identified as an opportunity for the government to clarify the balance between the overlapping duties that Universities face to promote freedom of speech and equality law. However, there was a recognition by several participants that universities could be clearer and more vocal proponents of free speech and academic freedom, and make it clear to students that disagree with others' views is part and parcel of the university experience and one shouldn't feel the need to self-censor.
- There was an extended discussion about the role that financial sanctions could play in ensuring universities adhere to their freedom of speech commitments. Some felt that this would give teeth to the process and ensure progress was made. Others were concerned that streamlining the suing process for those who feel universities have not done enough to promote free speech in individual cases (as is currently proposed in the bill) would create perverse incentives for university leaders who would avoid debates in the first instance to limit their liability.
- Some academics spoke of their personal experiences of the most affected groups in universities being harassed and forced to self-censor as ex-Muslims, Jewish students, and gender critical activists – and shared their concerns about the politicisation of university leadership. Others talked about the need to make codes of conduct in universities more enforceable. Some academics talked about correcting the virtue signalling incentives that can be available in academic contexts that exacerbate levels of self-censorship by those with minority opinions or beliefs.

**The ultimate shape of the Online Safety Bill will have an impact on how we navigate harassment and censorship in the UK**

- Given the changing state of the Online Safety Bill, our roundtable did not focus on its detail as a key discussion point, however, several participants alluded to how it might impact the broader dynamics of harassment and censorship in the UK.
- Some participants talked about the differences in volume of harassment between different platforms in their counter-extremism work at a hyper-local level.
- There was a debate about the merits and demerits of banning anonymous accounts as a way to deal with harassment and censorship in the UK.
- De-platforming was seen as an action that should be taken seriously because it is so effective. Some participants cautioned against academic research that de-platforming can further radicalise extremists by pushing them towards smaller less-regulated platforms, by saying that continued access to a mainstream audience might represent more harm than more extreme content in front of a smaller audience.
- One of the opportunities identified with the Online Safety Bill is the transparency obligations on tech companies who would be forced to publish data on what harassment/abuse is taking place and what their response is to that harassment and censorship.

**A consistent theme emerged how those affected by harassment and censorship need to be better supported by the institutions and organisations that form part of**

- Several examples were cited by participants about the need for more support for those subjected to harassment and censorship and the leaders of institutions navigating cases of harassment and censorship in their organisation – particularly everyday institutions such as workplaces and schools. The Trojan Horse Affair in Birmingham was given as a clear failure of institutions to support local leaders in navigating a complex issue at the local level – including pressures from within communities and outside communities such as the American Far-Right in the case of the Anderton Park School.

**There was a broad discussion among participants about the solutions available in tackling harassment and censorship in the UK today**

- More courageous political leadership on these issues and a commitment to dial down toxicity in public debate.
- Better support for leaders in everyday institutions such as workplaces and schools in navigating these issues of harassment and censorship – both in terms of clear guidance and better rapid response from community leaders and other relevant institutions. More leadership needed by leaders at an official level who should give clearer guidance to those on the frontline in everyday institutions.
- Rolling out the successful media liaison officers in police forces across the country to include liaison officers for other institutions and specific groups.
- Replicating the model of the Community Safety Trust in tracking levels of harassment and abuse in the Jewish community including through alerting those who are being targeted and providing support.

- More education, awareness, and information campaigns to tackle harassment and censorship in communities and institutions across the UK.
- Tougher and more thoughtful action on perpetrators of harassment and censorship – avoiding disproportionate responses to ignorant mistakes but taking tougher action against intentional harassment that drives censorship. Considering better alternatives to action against perpetrators given the expensive and impractical nature of defamation action – e.g., the new complaints system for higher education proposed in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.
- Better enforcement of employment protections for freedom of belief and more guidance from the EHRC in this area
- An increased role for independent regulators who can speak truth to power even when it's unpopular e.g., Ofsted's role in inspecting and benchmarking against the 'preparing children for life in modern Britain' standard.
- Avoiding the Americanisation of this issues – focusing on what the UK law says and how these issues operate in the UK, not importing debates from the US.
- A more evidence-based approach to diversity and inclusion initiatives in workplaces and institutions
- Decisive action from social media and tech companies following the conclusion of the Online Safety Bill debates.

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