Should the news media link the murder of Jo Cox with the Brexit campaign?

This article is by Dr Bart Cammaerts, LSE.

The media have diligently and extensively reported on the just concluded trial of Thomas Mair, who murdered the pro-migrant Labour MP Jo Cox just before the Brexit vote. Across all media platforms her murder tends to be reported as the act of an isolated, disaffected and unemployed Nazi-loving nut-case, an attack by a domestic terrorist cell comprised of one person. Mair is, in other words, depicted as a rotten apple in an otherwise healthy barrel.

What disturbs me about this dominant narrative, however, is that the context within which this political murder occurred is not scrutinised, nor part of the public debate. This calculated and sick murder took place at the end of one of the most divisive and dirty political campaigns ever waged in this democracy.
Whereas both sides of the argument were twisting facts to strengthen their case, it was above all the Leave campaign that went overboard in terms of transgressing political decency. The political forces that were bent on cutting all ties with the EU waged a vicious and ruthless campaign. The end justified all the possible means, even if this meant tapping into what Jeremy Corbyn called the 'well of hatred'.

The Brexit campaign consciously tapped into and pandered to very dark racist sentiments that have always been deemed to be excluded from a legitimate democratic debate in this country, and rightly so. They not only mainstreamed, but above all legitimated, a populist and fascist discourse that used to be confined to the EDL or the BNP.

To give but a few examples of this: the Brexit campaign promoted the myth that if the UK stayed inside the EU, the UK would surely be ‘swamped’ by Ukrainian and Turkish immigrants. They insinuated that all immigrants are rapists by releasing a list of serious crimes committed by EU citizens in the UK.

A few days before the murder of Jo Cox, Nigel Farage stood before an anti-immigration poster with the slogan ‘breaking point’; the poster bore an eerie resemblance to a Nazi propaganda movie. Even the Conservative peer Sayeeda Warsi denounced the Brexit-campaign for its xenophobia and for claiming that ‘[t]he refugees are coming, the rapists are coming, the Turks are coming.’

What the Brexit campaign furthermore argued is that only those that wanted the UK to leave Europe are ‘for’ Britain and indeed put ‘Britain first’; they are the ‘true patriots’, whereas those that advocated for the UK staying inside the EU are ‘against’ Britain, and were basically positioned as traitors and this patterns continues until today.

In doing so, I would argue, the Brexit-campaign and those that led it, created a toxic climate of hatred and resentment towards foreigners in this country but also towards those in Britain that politically and in practice defend an open society, multi-culturalism, migration, humanitarianism, refugee rights, etc. This juxtaposition between the patriot and the traitor and the legitimisation by the Brexit-campaign of a xenophobe agenda undeniably provided the moral context in which the political murder of Jo Cox took place, but apparently this cannot be said as such.

It is, as far as I’m concerned, way too easy and above all misleading to depict the murder of Jo Cox as the despicable act of a mentally deranged loner which has nothing to do with the Brexit-campaign or with the way in which this campaign stirred and instrumentalised xenophobic hatred in this country. The Brexit-campaign has
unleashed and normalized something dark and sinister in British society and the murder of Jo Cox is just one manifestation of this. In these post-Brexit and post-Trump times, we need journalists to fight for democratic values and expose this toxic context which led to the murder of Jo Cox, not obscure or individualise it.

This article by Dr Bart Cammaerts, LSE written in a personal capacity.

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