The best way to stop normalizing hate crimes is to talk more about the people who act as allies

Aradhna Krishna  |  December 12, 2016

We cannot allow ourselves to become desensitized to hate crimes. (Reuters/Eduardo Munoz)

The aftermath of the US presidential election has drawn fresh attention to bigotry and threats against marginalized communities across the country. At the University of Michigan, where I teach, a man threatened a female student wearing a hijab, saying he would set her on fire if she did not take it off. A black baby doll was found...

Donald Trump’s critics argue that his campaign rhetoric and key appointments lend tacit approval to such actions. Stephen Bannon, Trump’s pick for chief strategist, is known to have white nationalist views; Jeff Sessions, his pick for attorney general, was rejected for federal judgeship by a Republican congress because of his racist comments. And Kris Kobach, Trump’s immigration adviser, has demanded a Muslim registry.

This hostile climate has prompted social justice advocates to warn of the dangers of normalizing attitudes driving racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny, making it the stuff of the everyday. It’s a reasonable concern: Psychological research shows that social norms are troublingly easy to shift. And one of the most important ways that Americans can resist becoming desensitized to bigotry lies in the kinds of media that we create, share and consume.

**Social norms are easily influenced**

To understand how easy it is to shift social norms, just think back to your middle school days. If children see popular students inviting only their close friends to their birthday party, they will do the same. However, if they see the popular students being inclusive and inviting the whole class, they will follow this norm.

Social psychologists Chris Crandall and Mark White recently conducted a survey in their research lab at the University of Kansas, comparing pre- and post-election social norms. They asked 200 Hillary Clinton and 200 Trump supporters about their feelings towards Muslims, immigrants, fat people and people with disabilities (groups that Trump had disparaged during his campaign). One set of questions concerned how acceptable they found discriminatory speech towards these groups.
In both groups, the study found that discriminatory speech was considered more acceptable after the election versus earlier. Our standards for behavior can change very quickly.

**The media’s role in changing social norms**

The media also plays a big role in changing social norms. When Trump made his comments against Mexicans, Muslims, and women, these comments were broadcast widely in traditional and social media. So although just one person (Trump) had said hateful things about these groups, repetition amplified the effect of his comments.

Now the media is also devoting ample coverage to hate crimes. The New York Times has even launched a new section, “This Week in Hate,” to cover fresh incidents of hate crimes and harassment each week.

The media is right to cover hate crimes, which are inherently newsworthy. But at the same time, the wide dissemination of information about these hate crimes risks shifting social norms. If everyone seems to be harassing women who wear hijabs or scrawling swastikas across buildings, we may soon become numb to these events, while those who hold prejudices may start to think of their biases as socially approved.

Unfortunately, we are not disseminating an equal amount of information about incidents in which hate crimes were stopped, or when people act as allies to the vulnerable. For example, after a student at Baylor University was shoved off the sidewalk and called the n-word by a passing stranger, CNN reported that hundreds of Baylor University students walked with her when she left class to ensure she was safe. Similarly, the Miami New Times reported that a customer in a Starbucks intervened to protect a Latina barista from a man yelling at her, “I voted for Trump! Trump! You lost, now give me my money back.” And after the hijab incident at the University of Michigan, Muslim students held a prayer meeting in a public space on
campus, and other students surrounded those praying in order to protect them. These responses to bigotry received some coverage, but they did not seem to gain the same amount of traction in traditional media or social media as the inciting incidents.

Why don’t proactive responses to hate crimes get as much attention as the hate crimes themselves? One theory suggested by my research is that humans tend to devote more attention to actions than preventions of actions.

For instance, in the signs below, the signs on the right have great action imagery—the horse and the rock seem to be moving. My research shows that these signs spark faster and more in-depth attention than the static signs on the left.
Similarly, reading about an action will instigate more mental imagery than reading about a non-action. This means it’s likely to get more reader attention, and hence be more likely to spread on traditional and social media.

This phenomenon is unfortunate. If we hear frequently about crimes that occur and much less about the crimes that are stopped, the former will become more normal, and therefore more acceptable.

To prevent this future, we need to spend more time now talking about how to stop hate crimes, and spreading the word about successful efforts to ensure that all people feel safe. Increased media attention on successful battles against hate crimes will reduce the likelihood that those who hold prejudices will feel they have social license to act on their feelings. They will no longer be predominantly greeted by news that suggests hate crimes are commonplace, and therefore permissible. Instead, we can normalize pushing back against prejudice and standing up for one another. If we want common human decency to be the standard for all Americans, we need to share stories that make it seem routine.
Aradhna Krishna is a behavioral scientist and the founding director of PAXNOW.ORG (People Against Xenophobia), which shares stories about people who stop hate crimes and ally themselves with victims of hate crimes. Learn how to write for Quartz Ideas. We welcome your comments at ideas@qz.com.

GOD’S TOOL

Trump’s foreign policy looks a lot like Rapture Christians’ plan to welcome the apocalypse

Heather Timmons  |  May 15, 2018

Protests over the embassy turned deadly, after Israeli troops shot into crowds. (Reuters/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa)

In 1995, the US Congress voted to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. But until Donald Trump, presidents both Republican and Democratic resisted implementing