



Newsroom Best Practices for Addressing Online Violence against Journalists

Perspectives from Finland, Germany,
Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom

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The production of this report was made possible with the financial support of the Adessium Foundation



The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media participated in the gender component of this publication.

The views expressed by the contributing authors in this publication are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.



About IPI: The Vienna-based IPI is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists dedicated to furthering and safeguarding press freedom, promoting the free flow of news and information, and improving the practices of journalism. Formed in 1950 at Columbia University by 34 leading editors from 15 countries on the belief that a free press would contribute to the creation of a better world, IPI today includes members in more than 100 countries and holds consultative status with the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Methodology and scope

This study examines best practices for addressing online harassment and attacks on female journalists adopted by newsrooms in Europe. This gendered focus reflects the fact that female journalists have been shown to receive different and more vicious online abuse than their male colleagues. At the same time, many aspects of newsroom efforts to protect journalists are equally relevant to both genders, and attacks on female journalists must be seen as part of a larger phenomenon of silencing the press through threats, insult, smear campaigns and other forms of abuse online. Therefore, this study examines the protection of female journalists as part of a broader analysis of newsroom strategies to counter online attacks on all journalists.

The study is based on data collected by the International Press Institute (IPI) in cooperation with the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in the course of in-person meetings with journalists, community managers, editors, legal experts and analysts in the period between April and December 2018 in five OSCE participating States: Finland, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. It is divided into two sections: (1) a general analysis of the issue in Europe; and (2) reports on the situation in the six countries visited.

The research was conducted in 45 newsrooms, where interviews were carried out with editors, heads of audience and journalists. The research further included interviews with media experts from civil society and academia. In addition, a total of eight focus groups with female journalists and freelancers were held to discuss measures for countering attacks affecting those groups specifically and preventing both the emotional and professional impact.

The selection of the countries was guided by the desire to gather the experience of journalists who operate in different sociocultural and political realities. In each of the countries, the research included journalists working for both large and small news organizations, i.e., both those have a dedicated team to moderate on-site and social media comments and those where journalists themselves engage with audiences even while operating under time constraints; journalists working in both capital cities and smaller cities; and journalists with different contractual agreements with news organizations.

The research specifically examined the measures implemented by newsrooms in four different areas: Pre- and post-moderation mechanisms for both on-site comments and social media posts; psychosocial support strategies; legal assistance; and, finally, coordination with social media platforms to tackle campaigns of online abuse against journalists.

The scope of the research around online harassment of female journalists included various interlinked aspects:

- an analysis of the context in which such attacks take place, with a focus on the specific topics covered by journalists that tend to attract waves of online hate;
- an analysis of the problem, i.e., examining the type of attacks and harassment journalists are subject to as a consequence of their profession;
- an analysis of the consequences of online harassment on targeted journalists, including self-censorship, emotional toll and reduced credibility due to smearing campaigns;
- and, finally, comprising the largest part of the research, an analysis of practices adopted by newsrooms and journalists to prevent online attacks, protect journalists who are subjected to them, and limit the consequences of such attacks on the ability of journalists to carry out their profession without fear of retaliation, and therefore without resorting to self-censorship.

Before going into further detail, it should be noted that this study does not intend to demonize or suggest the criminalization of social media, which in our view play an essential role in the consolidation and development of democracy in many countries.

1.2. Female journalists under attack

Although the numerous journalists, editors, managers and other experts who contributed to this study were given the possibility to speak about the problem of online harassment in both gender-neutral and gender-specific terms, there was almost complete agreement, across all countries and news organizations visited, not only that female journalists are more often targeted in online attacks, but also that the attacks experienced by women are especially vicious and often highly sexualized.

There is no doubt that there is a link between the particular subject covered by a journalist and the ensuing level of hate that she receives through online channels. Coverage of certain sensitive, polarizing topics carries a high possibility of harassment. But while men tend to be criticized, insulted and threatened on the basis of their professional output (news content and social media posts), attacks on women mostly focus on the journalist herself and her physical traits.

The experts and media professionals who contributed to this research agreed that this gender-specific harassment merited particular attention. These violent, sexualized attacks are seen as especially serious and as posing a deep challenge to journalists' ability to work; they are an alarming reflection of latent

and widespread misogynist sentiments present across our societies, and ultimately contribute to the legitimization and normalization of such sentiments.

For all the reasons above, journalists and news managers agreed on the importance of adopting strategies aimed at promoting healthy conversations both on the comment sections of online news platforms, as well as on social media platforms.

Interestingly, numerous contributors to this study pointed out that the attacks targeting women are often similar in nature to those directed at journalists who – on the basis of their names or physical traits – are perceived to have foreign origins or to belong to ethnic or religious minorities. In Poland, for instance, journalists perceived to be Jewish have been targets of violent waves of online attacks because of their (occasionally mistaken) religious identity/belief. In Germany, those coming from Turkish families, or from the wider Muslim community, have received violent online attacks more often than their colleagues, especially if they cover migration issues.

For woman journalists who also identify as members of ethnic or religious minorities, the harassment can become even more extreme. For them, covering a contested topic essentially means deciding to face an avalanche of online hate and threats.

In an interview with IPI, Layla-Roxanne Hill, director of the Scottish investigative journalism cooperative The Ferret and chair of the Scottish Trade Union Congress Black Workers' Committee, pointed out that if one is a person of colour "people find an extra dimension to attack you".

"You will find women writers, particularly Muslim ones, who will be charged with trying to promote certain religious ideology by simply raising awareness of things that are happening to them or to their community", Hill said. "There is always the 'otherness' that will take precedent over you being a woman and a journalist, when you experience online abuse, [...] so the emotional toll is one of isolation, loneliness and anger."

The situation can be compounded further if the journalist operates in front of a camera and her face is recognizable to audiences. "The problem is that this hate is now spilling onto the streets: Journalists are being attacked", Dunya Hayli, a well-known German television journalist said in 2016¹. Hayali, who has been the target of vicious online campaigns while covering the so-called refugee crisis, described how a person had approached her while she was shopping and shouted in her face.

¹ Wenn Sie sich rassistisch äußern, dann sind Sie verdammt noch mal in Rassist. Süddeutsche Zeitung, February 7, 2016. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/goldene-kamera-dankesrede-von-dunja-hayali-wenn-sie-sich-rassistisch-aeussern-dann-sind-sie-verdammt-noch-mal-ein-rassist-1.2852676>

Mònica Terribas, a renowned radio journalist with the Catalan public broadcaster, became a target of social media attacks by far-right groups amid the ongoing debate around Catalan independence. The online campaign against Terribas eventually resulted in an incident on October 27, 2017, when dozens of far-right protesters attacked the outside of her studio with stones.

The experiences of journalists such as Dunja Hayali and Mònica Terribas show how fast online harassment can turn into, and even legitimize, physical attacks.

The experts who contributed to this study debated whether women are primary targets of online hate because aggressors take advantage of the misogyny present in society to ensure that their messages attract greater attention and spread more quickly; or because the promotion of misogyny in society is in itself one of the goals of online vitriol.

Contributors in all countries, however, agreed that silencing journalists who cover certain politically or socially contested topics, and who express diverse opinions, is the core goal of online attacks. This silencing is achieved, on the one hand, by generating fear and self-censorship among journalists, and, on the other, by discrediting journalists in the public eye, leading to a loss of trust – journalists' most precious commodity – or loss of employment.

1.3. Topics triggering online attacks

While journalists have faced harassment for covering all sorts of issues, in the six countries analysed in this study, journalists said that online harassment tends to be connected with the coverage of certain particularly sensitive and divisive topics. These topics differ from country to country but share some commonalities. Coverage of refugees and migration, for example, has been a trigger for sustained harassment in Finland, Germany, Poland and the UK over the past four to five years. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been a particularly contested issue in Finland and Poland. Recently in Spain, discussion around the Catalan independence movement has generated attacks on journalists from across the country. Coverage of abortion tends to ignite attacks in Poland; the same can be said of coverage of far-right movements in Germany and Finland. Stories perceived as being supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, or of the “feminist agenda”, appear to trigger a backlash in the online spheres of all countries studied, especially in Spain following demonstrations in support of gender equality in main cities coinciding with International Women’s Day on March 8, 2018.

1.4. Nature of the attacks: similarities across countries

While journalists seem to be acutely aware about the topics that are likely to generate online vitriol, the more difficult question to answer remains whether the harassment they receive is coordinated, i.e.,

whether the messages of hate are disseminated by bots or by myriads of real aggressors; and whether the aggressors are expressing sentiments that they genuinely hold and/or are acting in support of a specific agenda, possibly even in exchange for financial compensation.

This study does not aim to answer that question with regards to the countries surveyed. It is, however, worth noting certain patterns that have emerged from IPI's years-long research into online harassment campaigns. Generally speaking, a coordinated attack is not just a reaction to an opinion expressed or a piece of information disseminated by a journalist, but rather part of a more concerted effort to take control of the narrative. Online harassment campaigns usually stem from a tweet or a post by an influential figure, typically a representative of a political party or of a movement, either openly naming the targeted journalists, or providing information that makes them easily identifiable. The message is immediately further disseminated by a group of users close to the influential figure. In the next phase, the followers and fanbase of the previously described users organically spread the message further, turning it into a trending topic. In this phase, it is also common to find large numbers of anonymous accounts, typically recently created, that take part in distributing the message. These accounts are usually computer-generated social media accounts, also known as bots.

Eventually, websites and news media close to the original influential figure or that support a similar ideology will cover the widespread criticism of the targeted journalists, giving credibility to the online campaign and reinforcing the idea that the journalists targeted and the news and opinions they share are not to be trusted. This also legitimizes further attacks.

Revelations about the existence of "troll factories" and organized online hate campaigns, in various countries in Europe, make it difficult to assess how much of the hate disseminated online is a reflection of actual societal sentiments, and how much of it is generated as part of a coordinated effort to intimidate and discredit journalists. Understanding the identity and motives of aggressors is an issue of interest to many targeted journalists, even to the point where it becomes a type of coping mechanism. Journalists interviewed by IPI as part of this research recounted having spent a lot of time analysing the possible identities of their attackers on the basis of their online profiles, as part of an effort to take control of the situation by grasping the reasons for waves of highly personal attacks which appear entirely incomprehensible.

"One of the best coping mechanisms for me was to get over the fact that this was happening to me, that I was not a victim and that I could use this in my work", Azerbaijani freelance journalist Arzu Geybullayeva said in an interview with IPI. "I started saving links from the stories [targeting me], taking screenshots of the [abusive] Facebook posts and on-site comments and one year later I had the opportunity to write about it. I pitched the story on trolls in Azerbaijan to one of the outlets I was working with and, of course, my personal story was one of the key parts in the article. I didn't focus

that much on my story [but more] on how effective they [trolls] are around certain political events, how the government recruits them, where they come from, etc.”

Our research also found similarities in the types of online attacks that target female journalists in Europe. These can roughly be divided into the following categories:

Belittlement

These are messages aimed at belittling the journalistic work of women simply because they are women. The messages are often condescending and question the journalist’s competence to carry out her work. This happens most frequently to women covering topics in historically male-dominated fields such as politics, economics, technology and sports.

“I have the impression”, one journalist told IPI, “that I’m not entitled to have an opinion just because I’m a woman.”

Another journalist in Poland recalled receiving messages asking: “How would you know about history in Poland if you are woman?”.

In some cases, use the name of the journalists in the diminutive.

“Never have any of the colleagues who preceded me (in the Spanish nation-wide morning news radio show ‘Hoy por Hoy’ on Cadena SER) had their work criticised by using the diminutive of their name”, Spanish journalist Pepa Bueno explained.” With me, when they want to belittle an opinion that I have expressed in the morning editorial, I am called ‘Pepita’. This is very frequent. Let’s say this is what they call ‘light’ harassment.”

Sexist insults

These are messages aimed at humiliating journalists for their physical appearance, without necessarily referring to their journalistic work.

Female journalists in Poland, for example, described how most of the abusive comments they received referred to them as “fat” or “ugly” or as a “slut” or “whore” in connection with their style of dress. This pattern is among the most common observed across all countries.

Explicit and veiled threats of sexual violence or death

Explicit threats are intimidating messages that express an open desire for the death of, or physical violence against, the journalist or that are direct warnings of death or physical harm.

Veiled or indirect threats tend to be apparently innocuous messages, but which the receiver interprets as threatening. The intimidating nature of these messages is usually deduced from the context that surrounds them.

Threats and insults to family and relatives

Journalists also reported that family members and colleagues might also be the recipients of threats, insults or humiliating messages. In addition, female journalists have been targeted with messages threatening or mentioning their children, an aspect seen much less often with male journalists.

For example, an anonymous user wrote to a journalist who was receiving lots of criticism and insults on Twitter at the time: “By the way, you recently gave birth, how is your son?”

“In the case of mothers, when violence reaches your children, you no longer just feel vulnerable yourself”, Spanish journalist Cristina Fallarás said. “When you receive a message at 7 in the morning saying, ‘let’s kill your children who are five and 10 years old’, of course ... that changes your life.”

Campaigns aiming to discredit journalists professionally

These are messages whose objective is to question content that the journalist has published, either by referring to her intellectual capacity or by alluding to the fact that said content reflects the personal or partisan interest of the author. This type of attack is also observed against male journalists, but in the case of women the attacks are usually accompanied by messages of a macho nature, belittlement and humiliation.

Another type of attack specifically aimed at disparaging the work of a female journalist is to link her job success to her love life. Many of the journalists who took part in this study stated that they had received many comments on social networks relating to the alleged “sexual favours” that they must have given to reach the positions they currently hold.

1.5. The search for solutions

The growing trend of online harassment against journalists, and the particularly vicious nature of attacks against female journalists and the ensuing consequences for the profession of journalism and media freedom as a whole, is a reality that journalists and news managers in all countries have acknowledged during the course of this research.

At the same time, editors and news media managers currently perceive little hope in addressing this issue primarily through the justice system or through social media platforms.

Online attacks can pose a great psychological burden on journalists and affect their ability to work without fear of retaliation and their credibility within society. However, many of these attacks fall within the bounds of protected speech according to international law. Criminal justice is appropriate for addressing only some of them, especially direct threats of violence and repeated harassment that rises to the level of stalking. Insult, especially when the journalist is a public figure, is generally a form of protected speech, while defamatory accusations of fact should be addressed in civil court.

conversations between social media platforms and newsrooms are ongoing in order to identify remedies that would limit attacks against journalists on social media without impacting free speech.

While stating that “Twitter’s number one priority is improving the health of the public conversation, and safety is a key part of this goal”, a Twitter representative told IPI that there was still much work to be done. “We will continue to have open, honest conversations with stakeholders across the world to ensure we are constantly learning about emergent malicious behaviours, and that our products and policies are sufficiently updated.”

In a similar vein, Facebook also explained to IPI that it had undertaken several changes to tackle this issue. “We know that journalists, especially women, are a particular target for online trolls and bullies. We take this very seriously and are committed to helping journalists stay safe on our platform. With that in mind, we have been engaging proactively on this topic with news organizations, independent journalists, and local and global experts for many years now to understand how our tools and policies could be improved”.

In acknowledgment of the fact that the complex issue of attacks against journalists can only be partially tackled through legal measures and cooperation with the platforms, news organizations have increasingly sought to develop effective internal strategies for addressing the problem.

The development of newsroom strategies related to the moderation of online conversations is in its early stage and no tested formula exists. The newsrooms visited or contacted as part of this study have adopted different approaches, guided primarily by the resources available and, secondly, by the relevance given to the development of a relationship of trust with the community of users. News organizations that value the creation of an active online community of readers are likely to invest more in the moderation of online conversations, with the goal of countering attacks against journalists and generating community support for them.

In this context, understanding the identity of online aggressors is important not only for the targeted journalists but also for moderators of online discussions, who aim to ensure that online discussions reflect the diversity of opinions that exist in society. “I believe in dialogue” is the premise that many social media and community managers put forward in interviews for this study. They said they used

this principle in deciding what content should be removed, blocked or silenced from online conversations (depending on what the platform in question allows) and what could and should be confronted and debated as a reflection of sentiments that exist in the societies they cover. Communities managers also said they hoped such engagement would lead the one or the other user to understand that criticism and corrections are welcome, but insults and threats are not acceptable.

Sadly, the general impression from our research is that newsrooms, while they acknowledge the highly problematic consequences of online harassment on their journalists, do not have sufficient resources to dedicate to a proper strategy of prevention and protection. This is the case, for example, for the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland, one of the leading independent voices in the country and the target of constant and highly sustained waves of harassment against its journalists. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which employs skilled community and social media moderators, said that the number of hateful messages it receives is such that, on one occasion, it even felt compelled to close comments under articles on refugees. "It wasn't a discussion, it was a sea of hate that we couldn't control", the newspaper's social media editor explained. Still, even the extreme measure of closing comments does not prevent the dissemination of attacks on social media platforms.

Some journalists who contributed to this study also reported that they took the decision not to be present on some social media platforms in order to try to limit the sheer number of hateful postings they receive. This measure, too, is considered by most journalists to be extreme and hardly viable in today's journalism reality, where social media platforms are not only a place where journalists gather information but also a key means of dissemination of ideas and information.

In small- and medium-sized newsrooms that are not able to employ full-time community managers and moderators for the comment sections, it is common for editors and journalists themselves to take time to review user comments and moderate discussions. Often, this task ends up being carried out outside of working hours or during supposed breaks. The psychological toll resulting from reading a large number of hateful comments either directed at the person herself or her colleagues is often underestimated.

Our research showed that not only is the development of strategies to counter online harassment at an early stage but so, too, is the development of a newsroom culture necessary to tackle the issue in a holistic and coordinated fashion. We found that while an increasing number of hateful and abusive messages directed at journalists, as well as vicious attacks on female journalists specifically, are an indisputable reality for all those who contributed to this study, limited knowledge of countermeasures, the overall novelty of the phenomenon itself, and often limited appreciation of the gender-based nature of the attacks, lead to a degree of apathy, indifference and/or helplessness on the part of some journalists and newsroom managers.

Some journalists with whom we spoke said they did not, or would not, report abusive posts against them to their superior. On the one hand, these journalists feared that doing so might reflect negatively on their performance assessment and professional reputation; on the other hand, some expressed a lack of trust that they would receive adequate support from their supervisors. Indeed, some journalists who had reported abusive messages to managers said they had received no response whatsoever.

1.6. Peer support as first aid

Journalists operating within newsrooms that lack a system for dealing with online harassment, as well as freelancers, said that colleagues and friends were the most important source of support when targeted with harassment. The possibility to share concerns with colleagues who have had similar experiences gives a feeling of not being alone in the storm and reinforces the vital idea that the community of journalists will stand together.

The importance of peer support, a practice that developed out of the spontaneous need for journalists to share the pain they face, is such that well-developed strategies for countering online harassment also include, among other remedies, a structured form of peer support. This support typically foresees the appointment and training of certain members of the newsroom who can be easily identified as being in a strong position to offer help, independently of hierarchic structures and reporting lines.

Still, while peer support is often the only remedy available and although it can provide some degree of support, there is a sense that this support is limited. Furthermore, other consequences of online harassment – such as the loss of credibility resulting from being insulted on public platforms or the self-censorship to which this pressure may naturally lead – require much more thorough strategies that only some newsrooms have so far been able to adopt.

1.7. Structured newsroom strategies to address online harassment

The ability of newsrooms to develop and implement structured protection and prevention systems to counter online harassment against their journalists is often dictated not only by strategic decision-making on the part of the news organization but also by the availability of resources necessary to put such a system in place.

In the course of this research, we reviewed and compared protection strategies adopted by news organizations that have invested in their online presence and pursued community building and comment moderation as an integral part of their journalistic activity. This study looks in particular at

the experience of private news organizations such as The Guardian (UK), Spiegel Online (Germany) and Cadena SER (Spain), as well as the public service broadcasters in Germany, Finland and the UK.

Looking at the approaches adopted by the news organizations mentioned above, some commonalities can be identified:

- A declared acknowledgment that online harassment directed at journalists represents an attack on the entire newsroom.
- A recognition that women, as well as members of minority groups, or journalists covering related issues, are targeted more often and in more brutal ways.
- The treatment of online attacks against journalists as an element of the broader phenomenon of hate speech and dissemination of disinformation, all of which seek to undermine the very foundations of journalism and democratic exchange of ideas.
- The development of preventive measures, including regular workshops on issues such as online security, emerging topics that tend to attract abuse, or how to cope with the emotional distress that might result from online violence.
- A commitment by newsroom managers to improving newsroom culture so that journalists feel comfortable in coming forward with their experience of harassment. This commitment includes offering journalists several points of entry to support channels so as to make it easier for them to seek help. These include dedicated email addresses, mobile chat groups, direct contact with line manager and heads of audience, and a peer support network constituted by colleagues who have been trained to assess risk and respond to trauma.
- A trend toward holding regular meetings with community managers, digital editors and different news teams for a “health check” on their work related to social media. These checks give the teams a possibility to bring up issues that they face in their everyday work and are a way of communicating that there are support mechanisms in place whenever needed. In times of crisis, such meetings can be held more often.
- The development of a set of guidelines and protocols to prevent and counter online attacks, highlighting clearly which content will be immediately removed and which alternative strategies will be adopted for content that cannot or should not be removed. All newsrooms that participated in this study agreed that rapid changes in technology, in social media tools and in the political landscape behind online attacks require a constant assessment and update of the guidelines adopted. In some cases, newsrooms have chosen to have the

protocols exclusively transmitted verbally, through frequent roundtables and workshops, to ensure they remain up-to-date.

- A general agreement that although existing judicial procedures dealing with online harassment are not as effective as they should be, it is important to report cases of threats, sexual harassment and insults to the police in order to increase the understanding of the phenomenon of online harassment among law enforcement and the judiciary. For those newsrooms that have access to legal defence, pursuing criminal charges or lawsuits against online aggressors has also proven effective in pre-empting further attacks.

The experience of newsrooms in dealing with social media platforms to request the removal of content varies greatly. Indeed, the experience of newsrooms in the UK and Germany, where social media platforms have local offices and staff who speak the local language, is different from that of their colleagues in Poland and Finland. Community managers and editors who participated in this study have expressed the desire to develop better communication avenues with social media platforms, in order to obtain the swift removal of highly problematic content, such as threats and doxing.

Practices also differ in the choice of online platform moderation adopted, which is partially influenced by the reality in which journalists and news organizations operate. Pre-moderation, meaning that users' comments will be posted only after being reviewed by an editor, as well as real-name registration requirements have been successfully adopted by some newsrooms, such as Helsingin Sanomat in Finland, diari ARA in Spain and Gazeta Wyborcza in Poland, to limit the number of abusive comments on their sites.

Only few newsrooms so far, and generally better resourced ones, report employing artificial intelligence-based software to ensure that potentially problematic posts are brought to the attention of newsroom and community managers as fast as possible. While AI software is perceived as a very useful tool, community managers feel it does not substitute human moderation. Furthermore, while it is true that AI software has improved its ability to identify potentially problematic comments, it is also true that aggressors (both humans and bots) have been successful in developing a language and tools to avoid detection by AI.

Our interviews with journalists, editors and news managers revealed a growing awareness of the need to develop strategies to tackle a problem that is only likely to grow. At the same time, the clear evidence showing that women and members of minority groups are particular targets of online aggression have reinforced the belief among observers that gender balance within the newsroom as well as a gender-sensitive approach to the content disseminated are also key to ensuring that women who receive online attacks feel fully supported and empowered in their working environment.

2. Country Reports

2.1. Finland

Over the course of five days in June 2018, IPI representatives met with editors-in-chief, managing editors, web and social media editors, and staff and freelance journalists to better understand online harassment and how it is dealt with in Finland. IPI visited the newsrooms of the leading national daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat; the evening newspaper Iltalehti; the national public broadcaster Yle; regional newspapers Maaseudun Tulevaisuus and Turun Sanomat; local city newspaper Turkulainen; and the regional Swedish-language minority newspaper Åbo Underrättelser. In addition, IPI organized two focus groups: one for female journalists and one for freelancers with the Union of Journalists in Finland (UFJ). IPI also met with Finnish lawyers, media researchers and other media professionals in relation to the Ontheline project.

Meetings concentrated on different types of mechanisms for dealing with online harassment, including prevention, community management, social media management, psychosocial support and legal measures. However, the discussions also offered an opportunity to learn more about the general phenomenon of online harassment and its manifestation in the Finnish media landscape.

Analysis of the context

In Finland, articles related to immigration, asylum and Russian interference prompt the greatest number of online attacks on journalists. The Union of Journalists in Finland (UFJ) and the union's newspaper, Journalisti, conducted a survey in 2016 for its members to find out many of them had been threatened because of their work. Out of the 1,400 who answered the survey, one-sixth reported having received some form of threat. Some 40 percent said the threats were related to articles dealing with immigration and asylum.

The online harassment of journalists covering immigration and asylum rose alongside increased numbers of asylum seekers in Finland between 2015 and 2016. Many of the online hate campaigns against reporters were aided by a propaganda website called MV-lehti and in some cases have been supported by far-right politicians. Almost all of the journalists IPI met during the visit reported that MV-lehti had played some part in their harassment cases.

"If I were 20 years younger, I would have had sleepless nights, but now I was just amazed at how they organized such a smear campaign against me", one journalist, who said he was the target of a disinformation news piece and harassing phone calls and e-mails, told IPI.

In a recent court case, the founder of MV-Lehti was sentenced to 22 months in prison on defamation charges in connection with a harassment and disinformation campaign against award-winning Yle journalist Jessikka Aro, who researched Russian troll factories².

Many interviewees in Finland said that ongoing court cases in Finland were important in determining what is protected speech and what is not, given that online harassers have frequently leaned on free expression in their defence. While it is positive that the Finnish judiciary has taken online harassment of journalists seriously, it is worth noting that, in the case of defamation specifically, international best practices on freedom of expression recommend restricting litigation to civil court. IPI has regularly called on states to remove defamation as a criminal offence.

There are many other topics that raise heated discussion in Finland, such as policy regarding wolves, the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, climate change, and minority rights. Many journalists said that once a reporter's name is known in certain circles, he or she becomes a target of harassment no matter what the to

Analysis of the problem

Many interviewees expressed concern over what they viewed as the normalization of hate speech in Finnish society. Journalists said that while they understood that receiving negative feedback was part of the job, the understanding of how much and how vicious such feedback should be accepted had become stretched.

In particular, attacks that focus on journalists' personal traits and private life have increased, a development highlighted by PhD researcher Ilmari Hiltunen of the University of Tampere, who studies how Finnish journalists experience external interference. Hiltunen's work goes beyond online harassment – it examines all ways in which external forces try to violate journalistic autonomy – but his findings conclude that such abuse poses a threat to press freedom.

"Many of my interviewees and those who answered my survey were worried that the difference between the professional role and private person was blurred in the eyes of the public", Hiltunen told IPI. "Attacks are more often focused on the personal traits of the reporter rather than (his or her) actions as a professional or the results of (his or her) work."

Hiltunen said that changes in journalistic culture – including efforts to "brand" oneself, increased social media presence, and reaching out to readers through strong, subjective opinion writing – had made journalists more visible and easier for the audience to reach through different channels. Journalists, he noted, have assumed more of a public-figure role than before. Young journalists in particular are advised

² *Jessikka Aro: Finn jailed over pro-Russia hate campaign against journalist*. BBC News. October 18, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45902496>

to merge their professional and personal roles, but the “personification” of journalism is not without its pitfalls.

“One important question is whether personification is actually a positive or a negative thing for journalistic credibility”, Hiltunen remarked. “I think this is an aspect that has to be contemplated in relation to online harassment and threats.”

Although employers in Finland are aware of online harassment as a problem, support from managers varies. In the 2016 UFJ survey, 18 percent of male and 12.8 percent of female journalists reported that their supervisor had not reacted to the threats. It must be noted that while a majority of respondents said that employers had a responsibility to protect their employees’ safety, one-fifth of female and one-third of male journalists said that they not reported threats to their supervisor at all.

Editors and other managers interviewed by IPI emphasized that the tendency to communicate harassment to managers differed from person to person. Readiness to discuss the issue also depended on newsroom size: in large companies, journalists often discuss cases with their nearest colleagues and supervisors, while only the most serious attacks reach top editors. In smaller newsrooms, where most employees work in the same shared space, information flow between journalists and their managers is better. The local newspaper *Turkulainen*, based in Turku, for example, has just two journalists, one editor-in-chief and one summer reporter.

“We are a small community and we know each other well”, *Turkulainen*’s editor-in-chief, Janne Koivisto, told IPI. “So when our summer worker faced heavy harassment and negative comments, I invited him to join me while I was delivering our summer edition to the neighbouring municipalities and we could talk about the issue while driving through the region.”

When it comes to the authorities, Finnish journalists said while police and prosecutors are aware of the issue, they are not taking it as seriously as they should. Many journalists consider reporting threats to the police as futile even though they agreed it should be done more often to at least send a message. The level of satisfaction in dealings with the police varies. One journalist described the positive experience of having a contact at the local police office who understood well the phenomenon of online threats and was willing to take measures to protect the journalist’s work in public places. Another, however, recounted disagreements with the police, which in this journalist’s view did not understand the difference between freedom of expression and hate speech. In some cases, threats against journalists are believed to even come from inside the police force.

Even if the police investigate the threats (which they are said to rarely do) the process usually stops with the prosecutor, UFJ lawyer Hannu Hallamaa told IPI. The legislative framework for tackling online

exists, Hallamaa said, but the necessary implementation lags behind. Policymakers have a responsibility for communicating the importance of the issue.

“This is a problem in the society, not a legal issue”, Hallamaa commented.

Still, there are a few recent, positive examples from Finnish courts showing how the legal system can be used to tackle online harassment. Linda Pelkonen was the subject of intense harassment in 2015 when, while working for the online news site Uusi Sumoi, she wrote a story on the rape of a 14-year-old girl in which a Finnish citizen of immigrant background was allegedly involved. In 2018, two of the three men charged with harassing her were ordered to pay fines for defamation, marking the first time a Finnish court convicted a person in connection with the online harassment of a journalist. (See also above on the case of Jessikka Aro.)

Some journalists said that online violence, threats and aggressive comments had changed the way they think about their work. No journalist reported having succumbed to self-censorship, but several indicated that they thought more carefully about the wordings of stories and headlines, were more precise with facts and re-considered the angle of articles. Many said they tried to write in a way that does not leave space for interpretation or mistakes that could ignite a flood of comments, a process that slowed down the work.

“Sometimes I have to take a break from (writing about) heated topics and write about something completely different”, one journalist told IPI.

Journalists said they thought twice about whether to write about immigration.

“I don’t want to (write about) the ethnicity of criminals to avoid the heavy moderation work afterward”, another journalist confessed, referring to the work of managing online comment sections.

Editors at Finland’s biggest daily newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, noted that the chilling effect resulting from online harassment affects not only journalists but also interviewees. Scholars and others have refused to have their names or faces mentioned in news stories out of fear of receiving hateful comments and threats. The editors perceived this development as a serious threat to a free and open society that embraces freedom of expression.

Analysis of the consequences

Female journalists

Finnish media professionals recognize well the gendered aspect of online violence against journalists. While male and female journalists receive similar numbers of threats, the nature of the threats differs according to gender. According to the 2016 UFJ survey, 14 percent of the female journalists surveyed

reported threats of sexual violence. No male journalist reported receiving such threats. Around five percent of both genders reported receiving death threats.

As part of its visit to Finland, IPI organized a focus group with prominent Finnish female journalists with experience of online harassment. Those present expressed the view that talking and sharing experiences with colleagues was the best way to cope with online abuse and harassment. Many had found support from secret Facebook groups for harassed journalists. Participating journalists also agreed on the importance of having colleagues read comments and emails on a harassed journalist's behalf and collect screenshots so that the targeted journalist would not have to experience the hate alone. Other coping mechanisms highlighted included humour, treating online harassment as a larger phenomenon rather than personal abuse, distancing oneself to the issue, avoiding certain topics, blocking or deleting social media channels, changing online behaviour, naming and shaming, and contacting or facing the harassers.

When it comes to employers' reactions, the experiences of the female journalists varied. In some cases, managers had either not reacted to reported instances of online harassment or had reacted with indifference.

"First they promised to help, but when the threats were sent to the editor-in-chief, the only answer was a short 'ok'", one of the journalists recounted.

Another journalist recounted how slanderous e-mails about her had been sent not only to her but also to her editor-in-chief and managing editors. The editors never contacted the journalist about the messages and did not respond to the email.

"What if they believed what was written about me?", she asked.

Participating journalists insisted that even a simple sentenced communicating support and understanding together with an offer to provide necessary measures would have been enough to ease the emotional toll. They also recommended a greater focus on harassment of female journalists as a structural issue reflecting the status of women in society rather than as single, separate incidents.

IPI also interviewed journalist and writer Johanna Vehkoo, who, together with illustrator Emmi Nieminen, published a journalistic comic book on online misogyny called *The Internet of Hate and Loathing* (Kosmos 2017). The book collects the stories of several women in different professions who have encountered online violence, goes through academic research on online hate, takes a look at the trolls and their motives, and finally, gives tips and suggestions on how targets can protect themselves.

Vehkoo, who herself has been a target of online harassment, has advocated for adding gender-based hate as an aggravating circumstance in hate crimes.

“The criminal system doesn’t cope with internet”, she said. “Our policy makers and the police have let the situation slip too far.”

Ilmari Hiltunen, of the University of Tampere, said his research had not encountered significant differences in terms of the amount of external interference that male and female journalists experience and noted that similar work in countries like Sweden and Norway had led to similar findings. However, that amount does not reveal anything about the intensity of nature of the harassment. Hiltunen also said that he had found significant differences in the attitudes of men and women regarding external interference.

“Female journalists clearly have a more negative picture of the phenomenon, and it causes them more emotional stress”, Hiltunen told IPI. “Female employees had a more negative impression of their employers’ and supervisors’ abilities to support them and more pessimistic views of the ability of their media outlet to curb external interference.”

Freelance journalists

IPI also conducted a focus group meeting with freelancers and representatives of the UFJ. In the 2016 survey referenced elsewhere in this report, 17 percent of journalists who reported having been threatened were freelancers.

Lacking the support of a media company, freelancers can feel especially alone when facing harassment. The focus group participants, many of whom were highly experienced, said they were not afraid to interact with harassers and insisted that they did not practice self-censorship, something they nevertheless admitted required great determination.

“I’ve chosen my side and I am very open about it”, one of the freelancers said. “You have to decide for yourself whether you do this or don’t. Reporting to police doesn’t go anywhere.”

The participating freelancers said that the best way to deal with harassers was to ignore or block them. Threats and aggressive comments should also be reported to the social media platform in question. The general view was that while engaging in dialogue with harassers might sometimes lead to a satisfying result, in most cases a “civilized discussion” was out of reach.

There was also the question of how to raise the issue publicly and with the media outlets that contract the freelancers for work. The more experienced freelancers at the focus group said while they realized that fighting online harassment could close some doors in the job market, they were confident of their ability to continue working. The pressure not to tell clients about online harassment is greater for less experienced freelancers, who do not want to be perceived as “difficult” out of fear of losing job opportunities. Avoiding controversial topics was seen as one way of skirting the issue altogether.

The freelancers also emphasized the importance of joining forces with colleagues, be they freelancers or staff journalists. “We have colleagues; we’re not alone”, as one of them put it.

Analysing its own response to the issue, the UFJ concluded that it should hold more informal peer support events for freelancers and other harassed journalists. It also acknowledged the need to direct freelancers to relevant professional support as needed and better communicate the needs of freelancers to media houses, which should also offer support.

Analysis of practices adopted by newsrooms and journalists

This section highlights measures and protocols that were already implemented at the Finnish newsrooms IPI visited.

Registration and moderation

The strength of comment authentication varied among newsrooms. Some require a name and contact details, which can be fabricated. Some require a Facebook account to register, which excludes non-Facebook users from discussion, but increases the likelihood that users will comment under their own names. In general, strong authentication measures were seen as a good way of preventing at least some of the harassment. The regional newspaper Turun Sanomat currently does not require any form of registration for commenting on its website but plans to change that, Sari Sarelius, the newspaper’s head of web editorial told IPI.

“I want a registration system, because it can prevent at least a bit of the worst comments”, Sarelius said. “But it is still in process since the change requires a lot of work.”

Sarelius and many other newsroom moderators commented that, in contrast to newspapers’ own websites, moderating Facebook – where much of reader discussion now occurs – is difficult and laborious: it is essentially manual work and there are no preventive algorithms for blocking abusive language. Also, comments on Facebook are published immediately, whereas on website comment sections comments can be hidden until a moderator approves them.

Smaller newsrooms such as Turkulainen lack a moderation team and the task instead falls to everyone. The paper’s editor-in-chief takes care of the moderation on weekends. Obtaining registration systems and some form of algorithm-based pre-moderation system could ease the burden of small newsrooms, which, however, usually lack the necessary financial resources.

Helsingin Sanomat (HS) has outsourced its moderation to Stockholm. The newspaper’s archive chief, Jarkko Rahkonen, told IPI that outsourcing has somewhat decreased the quality of moderation but has lowered costs significantly. HS has also tried different ways of curating comments. Today, readers have the

possibility to “endorse” comments they think have been “well argued”. The paper is currently looking for new ways to enhance its comment section, for example, by building it into a more “tree-like” shape so that discussions paths would be easier to follow.

Together with the Finnish fund Sitra, HS has facilitated initiatives on its website to test where “productive dialogue” online is possible. Focusing on topics such as “special education” or “immigrant integration”, these chats aim to find solutions instead of negative arguing. The chat is open for a certain amount of time, guided by rules for a productive dialogue and by moderators who steer the discussion when it appears to be heading out of bounds.

One of the biggest issues moderators face is evaluating whether a comment is offensive or not. Moderators said they would sometimes spend hours contemplating if a comment should be removed or not, since they do not want to unnecessarily restrict freedom of expression. Moreover, sometimes blocking comments on the website can just lead to a flood of unpleasant messages on another platform.

“We pride ourselves on freedom of speech, but the line (separating it from hate speech) is blurred”, Leo Lemmetty, the web moderator of the online news site and blog platform Uusi Suomi, told IPI. “We don’t want to restrict discussion too much, because we believe that open discussion could diminish harassment.”

The meetings with Finnish moderators confirmed previous findings that moderators, too, can grow tired of the hateful comments and messages with which they are confronted on a daily basis. For this reason, psychosocial support should be extended to journalists as well as moderators.

Community management

Most Finnish newsrooms do not have community management. One exception is the public broadcaster Yle. Last year, Yle appointed social media journalist Sami Koivisto as head of audience dialogue to manage and create a new kind of online discussion culture. Koivisto explained to IPI that Yle now has staff specialized in online communication and who engage in dialogue with the audience on social media channels. This approach, he said, was developed as a response to online hate that began several years ago. Talking with the audience about the issue that drive online anger and about the ways in which journalism functions has led to a healthier environment for discussion, Koivisto suggested.

“We have gained a lot of information about our audience through dialogue”, he told IPI. “We understand our audience better and we know what they think about journalism – listening to the audience is very important. We also tell them how we do journalism so there is less misunderstanding of how journalism works.”

Support measures

The most common and effective form of psychosocial support highlighted in IPI's meetings with Finnish journalists was talking to colleagues and receiving peer support.

When it comes to public support for journalists who are the targets of harassment, some journalists said that a public statement from their media company would be helpful, while others said it would only make the harassment worse. If editors or publishers do decide to show public support, they should do so in a way that does not cause more harm.

"Talking about harassment publicly might make it a bigger topic, and put the journalist more in focus", one journalist said.

Still, all journalists interviewed agreed that employers should strongly communicate that they stand firmly by the journalist, whether in public or private.

"As long as my colleagues respect my work, I am fine", another journalist told IPI.

Following several online attacks on Turun Sanomat journalists, the newspaper has taken concrete measures to ensure the safety of its journalists, including providing security cameras to the home of a journalist who faced death threats and threats to burn down her home.

Turun Sanomat Managing Editor Veijo Hyvönen told IPI that the paper's first reaction after another of its reporters was targeted in a vicious and organized online hate campaign last year was to temporarily close the chat and comments section of its website. Security measures for the journalist and for the newsroom were tightened after a taxi driver implied he had "unfinished business" with the journalist. The harassment continued on the streets and in other public places and eventually the journalist moved away from Turku, although Turun Sanomat ensured that she could continue working for the paper's parent company. Turun Sanomat has since collected together guidelines for journalists to be prepared for online hate.

In terms of legal support, most of the newsrooms either had either their own legal department or insurance to cover legal assistance. The Union of Journalists in Finland assists freelancers with legal issues, as well as other journalists.

2.2. Germany

Data on Germany was collected during a three-day visit to the country by IPI representatives. During the visit as well as in follow-up phone calls, IPI conducted interviews with news editors, social media editors and/or heads of audience at the German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF; Deutsche Welle; the German news agency DPA and Spiegel Online. Interviews were also held with the German Press Council (Presserat) and the freelance network Hostwriter.

Analysis of the context

The issue of online attacks against journalists in Germany revolves around two different yet connected aspects: on one hand, individual journalists occasionally become direct targets of online attacks, insults and even threats against them and their families (i.e., online attacks on journalists in the strict sense); on the other hand, as user conversations on news media websites and social media platforms in reaction to news coverage become an increasingly important aspect of journalism itself, the ability of news organizations to offer a space for a constructive exchange of ideas is challenged by the widespread presence of insult, aggressive messages and hateful speech.

While the dissemination of hateful messages online and online attacks against journalists represent two separate phenomena and may need different remedies, numerous points of contact can be identified. Indeed, researchers increasingly see online hate speech, attacks against journalists and disinformation as different elements of the same effort, which aims at disrupting the free marketplace of ideas that is the foundation of democracy, while creating social division and polarization. Numerous commonalities can be identified between the two, underscoring their common origin:

- News organizations and journalists who spoke to IPI agreed that both attacks on journalists and hateful messages that more generally aim at creating divisions and disruption online conversations are mostly in reaction to coverage of certain specific topics. These topics include refugees and migrants, far-right political movements, Ukraine, Israel, and, occasionally, sporting events.
- Typically, journalists who are singled out and targeted in direct, personal attacks – or even threats – are either women or those perceived on the basis of their names or physical appearance as having a migrant background or as belonging to a minority group. Consequently, journalists who operate in front of a camera and are therefore more easily identifiable on the basis of gender or ethnicity are more common targets of individualized attacks, insults and threats. In the case of women, such attacks will often use a sexualized language.

- Analyses of waves of aggressive posts in reaction to the publication of news on certain topics show that some posts are generated and disseminated by individuals while others are generated by automated bots.
- The users or accounts disseminating hateful and/or racist speech that creates division and disrupts online conversations are frequently the same that directly attack journalists either on the basis of their coverage or their personal identity.
- Attacks are disseminated both in the online discussion forums of news organizations as well as on social media platforms. In Germany, the most common platform for such attacks is Facebook, followed by Twitter and YouTube.
- As a large majority of the hateful speech online in Germany is addressed toward socially disadvantaged groups or individuals, journalists who cover issues related to those groups or individuals in either a positive or neutral tone become themselves targets of concentrated waves of online vitriol.

Analysis of the problem

Although German news organizations take online threats against their journalists seriously and take steps to address physical safety in extreme cases, there is a perception that Germany-based online attacks will not lead to violent physical attacks. (In some cases, German news organizations that also deploy journalists to dangerous locations abroad have employed different protocols to address online threats, taking into consideration the increased likelihood that online attacks turn into physical ones.) This is particularly concerning for female journalists operating in front of the camera, whose faces are more easily recognizable to their audiences.

Still, even in contexts where journalists have no major reason to fear for their physical safety, being targeted by huge and recurring waves of online harassment can have other consequences: On one hand, the harassment creates intense psychological pressure on the targeted journalists; on the other, harassment in the form of public smear campaigns greatly challenges the credibility of journalists in front of their audiences, compromising their professional position.

The coverage of the recent influx of migrants and refugees into Germany, in particular as part of the political debate related to the so-called "refugee crisis", has attracted the largest part of online vitriol in the country. The German news agency DPA, for example, described to IPI a "shitstorm" targeting its news editor, Froben Homburger, following his statement against the use of the terms "asylum critic" and "asylum

opponent"³ to define "those who participate in protests and attacks against refugees". Homburger said that the terms trivialized certain actions and called for news coverage to better define "the motives and attitudes" of those who oppose refugees.

The wave of hate that followed included both general attacks on DPA and personal, targeted criticism of Homburger. However, the aggressive campaign was clearly directed at the content of DPA's and Homburger's statements. This, together with his deep journalistic experience, made it easier for Homburger to actively engage in the debate on social media around this topic and personally respond to the attacks.

Doing so is not always easy for journalists, however, in particular when online attacks and "shitstorms" not only target journalistic content, but also the journalists themselves. This is often the case for women and journalists with a migrant background or who are members of a minority group. The journalist network Neue Deutsche Medienmacher (roughly: "New German Media Creators"), a group of journalists and media experts with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, has analysed how online attacks against journalists turn into hate speech. According to the group, "Particularly affected are journalists with a migration background. In their cases, online hatred focuses less on the content of their work than on their origin or skin colour."⁴

These forms of attacks are very difficult to counter as rational arguments against racist and discriminatory statements are not effective and efforts to create a constructive conversation in response to these attacks tend to be counterproductive. At the same time, these types of attacks tend to affect journalists much more deeply and have serious consequences on their ability to continue covering certain topics.

In the words of Dunja Hayali, an award-winning journalist with Germany's ZDF public broadcaster who became a primary target of online vitriol following her coverage of the refugee crisis and far-right political movements:

"I always look for the dialogue, I am interested in different opinions, different arguments, also as a form of personal reflection. But what is happening now is even hard to describe: threats, insults, offences, rape threats. Nobody is listening to anybody else, words get twisted, taken out of context. And if one's opinion isn't validated by the other, then you are an idiot, a bitch, a liar or under the thumb of someone else... And the problem is that this hate now is spilling onto the streets: Journalists are being attacked: Recently,

³ (<https://twitter.com/fhomburger/status/626323492510769152>)

⁴ "Wetterfest für den Shitstorm", https://www.neuemedienmacher.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/20180321_no_hate_speech_flyer_rz-1.pdf, last accessed June 1, 2019.



somebody approached me as I was shopping and shouted in my face “Du Lügenpresse, du Lügenfresse” (“You lying journalist, you lying mouth”). This is not fun!⁵

She added: “When looking for solutions, addressing compromises, in the type of coverage we give to refugees, please do argue with us, discuss with us, point to our mistakes. We are journalists not superior beings. We do make mistakes, but this does not mean that we are liars.”

Analysis of the consequences

Female journalists

Interviewees say it is clear that female journalists receive proportionally more attacks than their male colleagues in Germany, in line with the global trend in this area.

As in other countries studied by IPI, sexist, even misogynist attacks against female journalists in Germany are not only aimed at silencing journalists and challenging their credibility among their audiences, but also at creating division and conflict in society and polarising audiences, which ultimately have a highly disrupting effect on the peaceful exchange of ideas and opinions, which lies at the basis of any democratic system. Taking advantage of a certain level of latent sexism existing in society, messages of hate against female journalists, which often include sexual references, tend to spread more widely than other types of content on social media.

The frequent and serious attacks targeting Dunja Hayali are well known within the journalistic community in Germany, and many admire her ability to stand up to her aggressors. However, she has often admitted to being fearful⁶. In at least two cases, however, German courts have found individuals guilty of disseminating attacks against Hayali online to pay fines⁷.

Community managers in Germany told IPI that they are aware that women are particularly subject to online attacks, especially so when they operate in front of a camera. After Deutsche Welle began a programme of disseminating short videos on social media, the female journalists on camera became targets of severe attacks, both those based in Germany and, to a greater extent, those reporting from abroad.

⁵ “Wenn Sie sich rassistisch äußern, dann sind Sie verdammt noch mal in Rassist.“ Süddeutsche Zeitung, February 7, 2016. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/goldene-kamera-dankesrede-von-dunja-hayali-wenn-sie-sich-rassistisch-aeussern-dann-sind-sie-verdammt-noch-mal-in-rassist-1.2852676>

⁶ “Dunja Hayali spricht über die Auswirkungen von rechter Hetze auf sie.“ WELT, November 18, 2018. <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article184092854/Dunja-Hayali-spricht-ueber-die-Auswirkungen-von-rechter-Hetze.html>

⁷ “Rentner wegen Beleidigung von Dunja Hayali verurteilt.“ SPIEGEL Online, April 20, 2017. <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/dunja-hayali-rentner-wegen-hetze-auf-facebook-gegen-moderatorin-verurteilt-a-1144091.html>

When asked about remedies to address abusive messages against women journalists specifically, managers and journalists in Germany agree that generating awareness about this phenomenon within the newsroom is the most important factor. Community and social media managers say that, as is the case for stories on sensitive topics, there is a need to monitor comments more closely when the journalist covering a particular story is a woman.

Our research found that women who work for larger news organizations, where structures to address online vitriol are in place, will be given the choice to address potential attacks against them directly or leave that to a colleague or a community manager.

However, many female journalists do not operate within structured systems. Freelancers or those who work in small newsrooms are left alone to deal with the hate and abuse. In these cases, journalists say, networks of support, including colleagues and friends, have proven vital. The network Neue Deutsch Medienmacher, whose members are particularly prone to attacks and often operate as freelancers, has created a helpdesk to advise journalists on preventive and protective measures.

Analysis of practices adopted by newsrooms and journalists

Legal remedies

Media managers in Germany have stressed the importance of differentiating clearly between attacks that require a legal intervention and those for which legal remedies do not exist or would not be effective. In general, there seems to be consensus about the fact that existing legal remedies provided under German law are sufficient to address threats and the most serious attacks targeting journalists, and legal teams working with large news media also regularly file such cases with the judicial authorities.

Rulings by courts in Germany against perpetrators of online attacks and insults against journalist Dunja Hayali are often brought as example of successful judicial prosecution despite concerns about the application of criminal sanctions in defamation cases. While the prosecutions of Hayali's aggressors have received a lot of media attention, many other cases exist in which German courts were able to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of online attacks against journalists.

German news organizations said it was important to report serious threats to the police. They indicated that, in many cases, starting a lawsuit against an online aggressor, or even just threatening to sue, served as a strong deterrent for further attacks.

"Whenever we can, we will definitely bring the perpetrators of attacks to court", a ZDF representative told IPI. "Threatening to sue is also useful in preventing attacks."

Still, the financial burden of navigating the justice system means that doing so is mostly confined to large news organizations that have access to legal course.

In order to further strengthen judicial remedies in this area and the expertise of prosecutors and judges, in February 2018 the Landesmedienanstalt Nordrhein-Westfalen (the regional media regulatory authority of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia) launched an initiative aimed at offering legal support to news organizations and journalists in bringing cases of online aggression to court⁸. Under the slogan “Prosecute instead of delete”, the initiative seeks to promote prosecution of online hate postings with the goal of preempting further similar cases.

However, only a very small percentage of the attacks targeting journalists every day can be prosecuted under German law. In many cases, the language used is aggressive, insulting, offensive and/or discriminatory but does not amount to a criminal act and legal remedies are not available. In such cases, seeking redress through a civil court may be a more effective strategy.

For this reason, newsrooms, news managers and journalists across Germany have developed alternative strategies to address this hatred, shield journalists from it and its effects, and, ideally, ensure that users’ conversations taking place on web and social media platforms are relevant, constructive and interesting, therefore contributing to journalistic processes.

Removal of posts, blocking users

Whether on the news platforms themselves or on social media, the general approach by newsrooms in Germany is to remove only those posts that are unequivocally harmful and that do not contribute to an exchange of ideas. The same is true when it comes to blocking users, which is done only in very extreme cases, e.g., in the case of a direct threat. This approach is based, on one hand, on German newsrooms’ need and desire to respect the free expression of ideas as a general principle for which they stand; and, on the other, on the desire expressed by online editors and community managers in Germany that conversations taking place on their platforms reflect, to the extent possible, the world outside and the broad variety of opinions held by users. Newsrooms feel that it is vital for users to feel that their ideas are reflected in these conversations and that the discussions that ensue are in many cases the best tool to prevent attacks from escalating. Many community managers in Germany told IPI that a constant dialogue and confrontation with users, even those who use aggressive language, is important in the long term to create a constructive exchange of ideas. Similarly, many said that blocking users is generally not useful as

⁸ “Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger beteiligt sich an „Verfolgen statt nur Löschen““. Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger. January 20, 2019. <https://www.ksta.de/kultur/hass-im-netz--koelner-stadt-anzeiger--beteiligt-sich-an--verfolgen-statt-nur-loeschen--31883524>



many accounts disseminating aggressive content are either bots or operate by a person who manages a large number of accounts. When one account is blocked, the next will be created.

At the same time, comments by the community of online users represent an important soundboard for journalists and news organizations. Opinions emerging from online discussions, even if shocking and disturbing, need to be taken into consideration. There are nevertheless limits to what can be said, provided in most cases by internal guidelines set by the news organization, which are often also available to users and which take into consideration both the relevant laws and ethical standards.

These guidelines frequently foresee that posts attacking journalists are only removed – in the case of social media platforms, to the extent this is technically possible – in extreme cases, i.e., when the posts amount to threats, doxing, the dissemination of private information or illegal hate speech or when the level or intensity of the attack is judged to cause harm to the journalist. While any action is generally discussed with the journalist(s) affected by the attack, the general approach of German newsrooms remains that of giving space to both criticism of news coverage and of the news organization and its journalists, even if such criticism is expressed in non-constructive and even disturbing ways.

At the same time, news organizations operating online will do everything possible, on one hand, to prevent attacks against journalists or ensure they do not take the form of vicious personal attacks; on the other hand, to provide legal, psychological and other forms of support to their journalists and so limit the negative consequences of such aggression on the individuals.

The ability of news organizations to address these issues timely and effectively depends mostly on the resources that they can and are willing to dedicate to the moderation of online discussions. News organizations tend to agree that, in addition to a speedy removal of posts that are in breach of community guidelines, active participation in the conversations by journalists and other moderators is vital to prevent and counter violent attacks against journalists from being published and to encourage constructive criticism instead.

Software vs. human intervention

Community editorial guidelines – which in some cases take the form of a set of written guidelines circulated in the newsroom and made available to users, in other cases as a set of principles regularly discussed and re-assessed among members of the newsroom – serve as a starting point in determining which posts need to be removed or made less visible, to the extent possible, and which ones require a different type of intervention.

Depending on a newsroom's size, the number of posts it receives on its various platforms, and the availability of resources, managers adopt different tools to ensure that posts breaching community

guidelines are removed as fast as possible. The use of software, including artificial intelligence-based programmes, to block or highlight problematic posts is still very limited in Germany, even as many community managers believe that any future solution will have to be based on the use of software rather than being left exclusively to human resources. One of the largest German online news media outlets, Spiegel Online, has noted very positive results through the implementation of software and AI programmes, although it acknowledges that they are still at an early age and more needs to be done to develop effective software in this area. Spiegel Online uses software to highlight potentially problematic posts, which are later analysed by experts to assess whether they breach community guidelines and to recommend the steps to be taken.

Whether or not software is used in any part of the process of highlighting and removing problematic posts, community and newsroom managers in Germany tend to agree that existing software programmes are not sufficient to address the problem entirely and that human intervention for now remains indispensable. Looking ahead, as the number of user posts keeps increasing, community managers tend to agree that AI programmes able to learn and identify ever more precisely problematic posts on the basis of a number of elements, including language analyses and user behaviour, will be the solution to limiting the dissemination of problematic posts, including in particular those directly attacking journalists.

Relationship with social media platforms

While removing posts from a news organization's own platforms (web-based fora or social-media pages they can directly edit) is easy, removing posts from platforms that news organizations do not control directly, such as Twitter or Facebook, is more complex, as it requires the intervention of third parties that own such accounts or platforms. Here, news organizations depend on social media company's willingness to remove problematic comments and their timeliness in doing so.

The experience of German news organizations and journalists in requesting social media platforms to remove content differs. The majority of editors and managers interviewed by IPI said that the channels provided by social media platforms to request removal only very seldomly reached the desired results. In most cases, content is either removed with great delay or not at all. Journalists and newsroom managers are often left with the impression that social media platforms do not consider their requests and that the latter are processed by computer systems that send back automated messages. A Twitter spokesperson told IPI that such messages may appear automated because they are written in a standardized language but are in fact being managed by experts who follow a certain procedure to assess the request.

Some journalists and managers at large digital newsrooms in Germany told IPI that their requests for removal of problematic content are taken into consideration only thanks to the personal relationships they

have been able to develop with representatives of social media platforms, who in some cases are not even based in Germany.

IPI raised these concerns directly with Twitter in December 2018. The platform agreed that the situation described was not fully satisfactory and said it was working to improve its ability to meet the needs of journalists and news organizations and looks forward to working with the news community toward that goal.

News managers and journalists appreciate the fact that monitoring and assessing the large numbers of posts that appear on social media platforms is complex and resource intensive for all parties involved, particularly in light of the need to ensure such platforms remain available for a free exchange of ideas and opinions. Nevertheless, the general feeling in German newsrooms is that the current system is not working. There is a concrete fear that the abuse of both social media and news organization's own platforms to disseminate hateful messages against journalists and others may soon overshadow the benefit offered by the availability of spaces where opinions can be freely exchanged.

Today in Germany, in a context where journalists feel they can operate safely and free of repercussions, developing a strong community of users who can actively contribute to journalistic processes by serving as a soundboard is considered a vital goal for most online newsrooms, in spite of the associated problems. News organizations believe that investing resources required to shield journalists from attacks, while still leaving space for criticism of their work, and to develop healthy conversation with the community of users, is not only necessary but also worth the investment.

Moderation and participation in online discussions

"We want to invest in dialogue", Spiegel Online, Germany's second-largest online news organization, which receives an average of over 100,000 comments on Facebook every week, told IPI. As with many other German online media, Spiegel Online has dedicated a growing amount of time and resources to creating a constructive dialogue with its community of users.

Comment moderation, whether on news organizations' websites or on social media, is perceived as the core element in limiting abusive comments. Most newsroom managers who spoke with IPI agreed that this task cannot be effectively outsourced. Online newsrooms report positive results following the direct participation in and moderation of online forums by journalists and community managers. The visible participation of newsroom representatives serves as a deterrent to those who intend to post abusive messages. At the same time, community managers and moderators can encourage the community of users to jointly react to those who do post aggressive comments against journalists, eventually limiting the effects of aggressive posts by generating overwhelming support for the journalists by the community.

While resources do not allow for a constant presence and moderation of all ongoing discussions, some newsrooms have adopted the policy of asking their journalists and moderators to be present and engage in the discussion for at least a period of time after an article's publication. This policy is seen as particularly important for articles related to topics that are known for generating waves of online vitriol.

Deutsche Welle told IPI that its German-language service has one community manager exclusively dedicated to moderating each platform on which DW is present and that its English-language service even has community managers active around the clock.

Representatives of DPA told IPI that the news agency engages in discussions with users whenever:

- The posts received include concrete questions related to the organization's work;
- The posts received include requests for correction, or otherwise claim that the information disseminated was incorrect; or
- The posts include legitimate criticism of the news coverage.

Specific software and tools offered by social media platforms, for example in the case of Facebook, are also useful in bringing to the attention of editors and managers discussions in which users are particularly active and may require closer monitoring and potentially intervention. While most discussions tend to take place around recently posted content, sometimes discussions on old content are restarted. Software and tools are particularly useful in bringing these phenomena, which are more difficult to anticipate, to the attention of managers.

Software is also used to temporarily block discussions about particularly sensitive topics at times when monitoring is not feasible, for example during the night.

Support for journalists

Regardless of whether or not they have developed a written set of community guidelines, German news organizations agree on the importance of regularly discussing the issue of online harassment within the newsroom and reassessing internal policies related to online attacks. This internal exchange of ideas and information takes three forms:

- Regular workshops (quarterly or semi-annual) with experts with the purpose of ensuring that all members of the newsroom are aware of and familiar with cybersecurity tools necessary for protecting their devices, identities and information. These workshops also represent an opportunity to re-assess existing policies and guidelines, share information about new topics attracting online attacks and determine the need for further expertise.

- More frequent newsroom meetings (weekly or monthly) to discuss emerging problems, specific attacks affecting members of the newsroom, the editorial approach toward the coverage of certain issues that attract online attacks, and emerging trends from the user community.
- Emergency meetings in situations of crisis to define remedies to a wave of attacks against a journalist.

News organizations with a strong online presence also invest in preventive measures, with a focus on workshops teaching journalists not only how to protect their devices (cybersecurity) but also how to deal with disturbing content reaching them through digital means.

Legal and psychological support is available to journalists experiencing trauma, including in relation to online harassment. Large news organizations tend to be able to offer much more resources in this area. Journalists, moderators and community managers are made aware that users' posts may contain disturbing content that can affect their psychological well-being. They are encouraged to take regular breaks, in particular whenever confronted with shocking and disturbing content.

"Sometimes, even just going out for a walk, or having a coffee with a colleague can be very helpful, and journalists and moderators are encouraged to remain aware of this", a ZDF representative told IPI.

In only a few cases have journalists been encouraged to take an extended period of leave as a consequence of online attacks. In the majority of cases, German journalists feel that such attacks are disturbing and have the potential to induce self-censorship, but that thanks to the newsroom structures they are a part of in some cases to the positive input they receive from users, they have the strength to cope with them.

2.3. Poland

Over the course of five days in June 2018, IPI representatives met with editors-in-chief, managing editors, web and social media editors, and staff and freelance journalists to better understand online harassment and how it is dealt with in Poland. IPI visited the newsrooms of the largest national daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*; weekly news magazines *Polityka* and *Do Rzeczy*; investigative journalism and fact-checking platform *OKO.press*; and smaller publications *Krytyka Polityczna* and *Res Publica*. In addition, IPI organized two focus groups: one for female journalists and one for freelancers with a representative of the Journalists' Association (*Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie*).

Meetings concentrated on different types of mechanisms for dealing with online harassment, including prevention, community management, social media management, psychosocial support and legal measures. However, the discussions also offered an opportunity to learn more about the general phenomenon of online harassment and its manifestation in the Polish media landscape.

Analysis of the context

In Poland's polarized political landscape, journalists are frequent targets of online attacks. Harassment, towards journalists and ordinary users, has become such a part of Poland's Internet landscape that a new word has entered the Polish language: "hejt" (pronounced "hate").

These online attacks reflect the deep divisions within Polish society. The country has split between supporters and opponents of the socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS in Polish) government, in power since November 2015. This rift extends to much of the media. There are no neutral issues in today's Poland, several journalists interviewed by IPI in Warsaw quipped, referring to the acute polarization of Polish society and the media.

Analysis of the problem

Nevertheless, there are several issues that stand out, fuelling harassment of journalists who write about them by people on the other side of the political divide.

The first issue is domestic politics. Journalists who criticize the government are attacked by its supporters, who attempt to delegitimize them and thereby undermine their work. This includes slamming them as "leftists", a derogatory term to Polish conservatives, or "supporters of the losers", referring to the centre-right Civic Platform party, which lost the 2015 elections after eight years in government. Critics of the government are often accused of being supported or funded from abroad, notably Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros, a kind of bogeyman for the Polish (and Hungarian) right. For example, in January 2018, conservative weekly *Gazeta Polska* published an article entitled "Ślepnące oko utrzymanków

Sorosa. Portal OKO.press bez wsparcia z zagranicy”, which translates roughly as “The fading eye of Soros’s kept people. Portal OKO.press without support from abroad”. There, it goaded over the independent fact-checking and investigative journalism website’s call to readers for financial support and allegedly small number of readers. By presenting OKO.press as a failure, Gazeta Polska sought to undermine its credibility as an independent portal that is keeping the government in check.

These types of attacks are felt most acutely at Gazeta Wyborcza, which has positioned itself as the leading critic of the PiS government. The newspaper faces an “ocean of hate”, its deputy editor-in-chief Jarosław Kurski told IPI. Other journalists at the daily spoke of being attacked by supporters of the government online. Gazeta Wyborcza’s status as enemy number one is so strong that supporters of the government present any form of association with it as a liability. As a result, OKO.press, which was initially co-funded by Gazeta Wyborcza’s publisher, Agora, gets called “the child of Gazeta Wyborcza”, as a further way to discredit it.

As a result, journalists at media organizations critical of the government find themselves placed on the defensive.

“We are constantly being put in interrogation mode”, Wojciech Przybylski, chairman of Res Publica Nowa, which publishes the Res Publica periodical, said, referring to slurs the publication receives online.

In interviews with IPI, no journalists admitted to self-censorship, but some said they had considered staying away from certain topics. Journalists who write about refugees have experienced some of the most virulent attacks. The Polish government’s refusal to take in refugees from the Middle East as part of the EU’s relocation scheme, presenting them as a security threat, has triggered a broader wave of anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Muslim, discourse in the right-wing media and on social media. The reaction in Polish society has been so strong that journalists at liberal publications say that even regular readers who generally share their worldview have reacted negatively to their articles about refugees.

Journalists have also been attacked about how they write about the Polish-Jewish past, a subject that made headlines in January 2018, when PiS passed a law making blaming the “Polish state or nation” for the crimes of the Third Reich punishable with up to three years in prison (in June, after considerable criticism by Israel and the United States, the provision was dropped). Journalists who question Poland’s role during the Second World War have been attacked on social media, often with anti-Semitic overtones, even when the author is not Jewish. Writing about the Polish-Jewish past, having a “Jewish-sounding name”, or even one’s appearance can all trigger anti-Semitic insults on social media, one journalist who regularly receives them told IPI. The recent wave of attacks comes on top of longer-term anti-Semitic smears against Gazeta Wyborcza and its editor-in-chief, Adam Michnik, a communist-era opposition figure with Jewish roots.

Finally, journalists – usually women – are attacked for writing about gender-related issues, such as access to abortion. Since PiS came to power, conservative groups backed by the Catholic church have sought to tighten Poland’s restrictions on abortion, which are already among the strictest in Europe. Journalists who criticized the proposed ban found themselves inundated with insults and threats.

With regards to the response of law enforcement authorities, journalists suggested a need for improvement. Finally, journalists suggested a need for improvement in authorities’ response to the issue. One male journalist we spoke to said he contacted the police after receiving death threats (for writing in favour of Poland taking in refugees). However, he said the police told him he would have to hand over his computer to help with the investigation, which he didn’t want to do. He implied that the police weren’t very helpful, almost as if to discourage him from filing a formal report.

Analysis of the consequences

Female journalists

IPI’s conversations with female journalists in Warsaw, both during the dedicated focus group and individually, show the pervasiveness of online attacks against female journalists.

Many female journalists said they face condescending comments online daily. This includes being addressed by their first name, or a diminutive of it (usually reserved for small children or close family situations), rather than by the polite “Pani” (Ms.) used between strangers in Poland. Female journalists also reported receiving comments about their appearance, both positive and negative, in online comments or on social media.

One journalist described the experience of stalker-like behaviour by a reader, whom she calls her “psycho-fan”. The reader would comment online underneath all her articles, many of which were about the refugee situation in Europe, with insults about her name, which he assumed to be Ukrainian (she is Polish). “He told me to go home to Ukraine, rather than write about refugees”, she told IPI. “His comments made sense, which suggests that he was not a bot.”

Another journalist, who took part in IPI’s focus group with female journalists, is regularly attacked online for her (wrongly) assumed Jewish background. This includes comments like “You will die in Auschwitz” or “You will leave Poland through the chimney [in Auschwitz]”. She has also received insults or threats relating to Israel’s actions towards Palestinians. “I experience anti-Semitism every day, even though I am not Jewish,” she said.

Multiple female journalists reported receiving threats online. The journalist who writes about refugees received comments stating that she “wants Muslims to come and rape her”. Another female journalist said

that she had experienced doxing, as part of a broader online attack against her by conservative circles. One day, she received a message telling her to “say hello to your sister; I hope she is in good health”, which used her sister’s real name.

Female journalists described the impact of online harassment on their work and broader lives.

“It was a feeling of being punched in the stomach”, said one, who was attacked on Twitter by a prominent right-wing journalist, which prompted a volley of attacks by his supporters.

Freelance journalists

IPI also conducted a focus group meeting with freelancers and a representative of the Journalists’ Association (Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie).

Lacking the support of a media company, freelancers can feel especially alone when facing harassment. The group that IPI spoke to in Warsaw placed online harassment in the context of the broader challenges faced by journalists in Poland, especially freelancers, who lack a regular salary and institutional support. Jacek Rakowiecki, who was representing the Journalists’ Association, framed this as the dual problems of “pauperization” and “lack of solidarity” among journalists in Poland. These aggravate, rather than eclipse, the problem of online harassment, he said.

In addition to the main issues outlined above, individual freelance journalists reported being targeted for their coverage of more specific issues. One, who specialises in Russia, says she was called a Russian spy online for writing a book review that was not deemed not anti-Russian enough.

“I experienced ugly name-calling by friends and people I respect intellectually. In a way, that is more hurtful than being harassed by bots,” she told IPI at the focus group. “It becomes a minefield of what you do or don’t want to say.”

Another freelance journalist, who covers a range of cultural and environmental issues, said that she was harassed after writing about hunters. Unpleasant posts appeared under her article. She also stumbled upon an article about her on a hunting website. This might make her think twice before reporting about hunting again for fear of being recognized and placing herself in danger, she said.

“Hate speech, with Poland’s political divisions projected onto it, has become part of Polish public culture”, Rakowiecki said. This may have a chilling effect on freelancers, who might fear that they won’t get another commission if they speak up about their experiences of online harassment, he warned.

Analysis of practices adopted by newsrooms and journalists

Individual coping strategies

Journalists who have experienced online harassment have developed individual coping strategies. Most concurred that one should not engage with online abusers, as that can encourage them. As one journalist put it: “There is no point in feeding the troll.” Basic responses include blocking or muting the abusers. As one journalist highlighted, the advantage of muting is that the attacker does not notice, preventing a backlash among like-minded users. Journalists also said that they report abusive comments or accounts on Twitter and Facebook.

One journalist said that she likes to involve her Twitter followers, asking them to report users who attack her. For this, she uses the hashtag #sprzątamytwitter – literally: we are cleaning up Twitter. Her followers respond actively, with some tweeting back “I helped you”. This approach has the advantage of strengthening the supportive online community around her, she said.

Many journalists said that they resort to “naming and shaming” their abusers on social media. On Twitter, this involves retweeting insulting tweets with a comment, for their followers to see. In some cases, the journalist found an online abuser’s employer listed on their Facebook profile and sent the employer an email describing the employee’s inappropriate behaviour. After that, the harassment stopped, accompanied by a sheepish apology from the attacker.

Journalists who had experienced concerted attacks admitted to keeping a lower profile online. Some said that they had taken time off social media, both to escape harassment and as a general break. Other strategies include turning off notifications on Twitter.

“You tell yourself that it doesn’t matter, but then you get a stream of messages. So I chose, for now, to build these walls”, one female journalist who was attacked in a particularly concerted way said. She added that she deliberately made herself less accessible as a journalist by making it difficult to contact her online.

Another journalist recited a mantra that she repeats to herself when she receives an insulting or threatening tweet: “That was Twitter. Now this is the real world; I am safe, I am at home. That was only Twitter.” She tries to reframe critical or abusive comments online as a sign that she is doing her job well, in the context of the political conflict in Poland.

“Every time I get these comments, I know that I am doing something right – and must continue writing”, she told IPI.

Others try to respond to online attacks with humour. “Usually we just turn this into jokes. At least they [our critics] remember that we exist”, quipped the editor-in-chief of a small news organization. One of the publication’s journalists uses the hateful comments he receives as the basis for his columns.

Registration and community management

Newsrooms have struggled to moderate online discussions on their websites or on social media effectively. Many cited understaffing, in the context of media organizations’ broader financial troubles and pressure to keep up with the news.

Social media editors whom IPI spoke to said that they are already overworked and unable to constantly moderating comments online. Some felt that their job is taking a toll on them.

“Working in social media, you become desensitized”, one social media editor told IPI. “You can emerge with a very dark view of the world.” Nevertheless, she felt unable to take longer breaks from social media, citing lack of staff who could replace her.

Online editors tended to differ in their approach to comments on the media organization’s website and on external platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Forced to prioritize, many said that they rarely moderate discussions on Twitter or Facebook, instead focusing on their own websites. Indeed, some social media editors suggested that deleting comments on Facebook might be counterproductive, triggering a backlash among other Internet users.

Unable to moderate the comments under all articles, some newsrooms have experimented with making it more difficult for readers to comment. For example, Krytyka Polityczna switched from open comments on its website to a Facebook plugin that forces readers to log in to comment. This has resulted in fewer, but higher quality, comments and a better discussion, Agnieszka Wiśniewska, editor-in-chief at Krytyka Polityczna, said.

Gazeta Wyborcza has gone further. Since August 2017, it has limited comments to paying subscribers. Before then, users only had to register or log in via Facebook to comment. With the newspaper struggling to cope with hateful online comments, the change was an attempt to “clean up this mess”, Mateusz Szaniewski, the newspaper’s social media editor, told IPI. After the change, the number of comments dropped from an average of around 100,000 a month to 55,000. Since then, it has stabilized at around 70,000. The drop was not as bad as expected.

“We thought the change would kill the comment section, but it didn’t”, Szaniewski said. The rules for commenting remain unchanged; subscribers who comment still need to be polite.

On rare occasions, Gazeta Wyborcza takes further measures to limit potentially hateful comments. In September 2015, at the peak of the migration crisis in Europe and just weeks before the Polish parliamentary elections, the newspaper decided to close comments under articles on refugees. "It wasn't a discussion, it was a sea of hate that we couldn't control", Szaniewski said. Occasionally, the paper closes the comments under articles about specific people, including obituaries.

Support measures

The most common and effective form of psychosocial support highlighted in IPI's meetings with Polish journalists was talking to colleagues and receiving peer support. The newsrooms visited by IPI displayed a lack of formalised psycho-social support for journalists who have experienced online harassment. While most of the newsrooms have access to lawyers, whether in-house (at large media organizations) or outside (at smaller ones), psycho-social support remains limited and informal. Journalists did not have ready access to a psychologist or other professional at work.

Without formal support mechanisms, journalists rely on informal support from their editors, other colleagues and families. Editors emphasized the importance of cultivating a sense of community at the newsroom, as a support network for journalists. This sense of community was especially strong at small newsrooms, such as OKO.press and Krytyka Polityczna, where the journalists form close groups, strengthened through socializing outside the office.

Agnieszka Wiśniewska, editor-in-chief of Krytyka Polityczna, said that she is in contact with regular freelance contributors and seeks to strengthen informal bonds with them using an email thread, where they can share contacts or other information. More opportunities to meet in person as a group would be idea, she added.

Nevertheless, some journalists highlighted the limits of this kind of informal support. One journalist who was attacked on Twitter said that, while her colleagues tried to be sympathetic, they were ill-equipped to offer her the psycho-social support that she needed. "They simply told me to 'ignore him'", she said.

Journalists also feel that a broader professional solidarity between journalists across the political spectrum is missing. "If a journalist is slandered in the public media, everyone is targeted; one day you, another day me", one journalist at a major newspaper said.

Finally, journalists also highlighted the importance of building a community of readers through engaging with constructive comments in the online comments or on social media. Many described instances of readers coming to their defence when they were attacked online. These loyal followers can also be relied on to foster a healthy online discussion about articles, drowning out the trolls, they added.

2.4. Spain

In April 2018, IPI, together with the Platform for the Defence of Free Expression (PDLI), met in Madrid and Barcelona with representatives of various media, journalists and press unions to conduct a survey of the scope of the phenomenon known as online harassment and of the impact it has on both staff and freelance journalists.

IPI chose Spain for the pilot study because the independence debate in Catalonia, the proliferation of cases of political corruption in the last decade and the renewed impetus of the struggle for gender equality have shaped a new social reality that reflects many of the issues in other countries.

Analysis of the context

This last decade has been one of the most convulsive periods experienced in Spain, both at the political and at the social level, since democracy was established. Broadly speaking, the deep economic crisis that hit the middle and lower classes especially hard and the constant trickle of political corruption stories eroded the confidence of Spanish society in its institutions. The discontent of a large part of the population gave rise, on the one hand, to the social protests of the 11M, which led to new political formations and, on the other, to the strengthening of social movements that had been around for years, such as the independence process in Catalonia.

Analysis of the problem

The restructuring of the political space throughout this period has generated tensions that have also been reflected on social media. In a polarized context, in which if “you’re not with me you’re against me”, journalists have become the subject of avalanches of intimidating messages on Facebook, Twitter or in the comments section of websites. The patterns of these messages and comments sometimes seem to suggest coordinated action.

“Sometimes that is the impression you get”, Pepa Bueno, the presenter of the radio programme Hoy por Hoy at Cadena SER, said of online attacks. “When you have finished a tough interview with a political leader who is in a special moment or where many contradictions emerge, and you bring up their contradictions, sometimes there is an impression that the answer (on social networks) is very coordinated and instantaneous and that, in addition, influencers of that party or from that politician’s environment support these messages or validate the insults. It happened during the electoral campaign and it happened around October 1 (the 2017 referendum in Catalonia), when public opinion was more polarized than ever.”

Similarly, Mònica Terribas, one of the most influential journalists in Catalonia and the presenter of El Matí de Catalunya Radio on public radio in Catalonia, described how the constant self-interested or partisan interpretation of her words results in a feeling of psychological exhaustion.

“Since I started at Matí de Catalunya Radio five years ago, I have the feeling that all my words are decoded and translated by many people in many more ways than the meaning you want to give them”, she said. “It is very tiring because it takes away spontaneity, it takes away freshness, it takes away the ability to share joy, especially when many people are facing very difficult times”.

Moreover, in her case the threats crossed the border of the virtual world and resulted in physical attacks against the building in which she worked and in demonstrations organized by far-right groups demanding her resignation.

“I don’t care that a more or less right-wing extremist group comes to throw stones at the windows of the radio station”, Terribas said. “What worries me is that the police have not identified them even though there are pictures, or that the public prosecutor for hate crimes has not opened an ex officio investigation despite taking up other, less serious cases.”

This loss of confidence in the authorities is a key concern for Ana Pastor, host of the news programme El Objetivo on the broadcaster La Sexta.

“I believe that networks sometimes are a bubble, sometimes a place for self-glorification and sometimes a place where crimes are committed but are not prosecuted in the same way”, Pastor said.

In this context of polarization, Pastor argued that we must distinguish between threats from anonymous individuals and messages that come from political leaders in powerful positions. “For example, when I worked for the Spanish public broadcaster, a senior politician openly said on social media that I should be fired. And well, what a surprise, I was let go. When you are in a powerful position and you exercise your power like that, this is clearly an attack on freedom of expression, and we have witnessed this in this country on many occasions”.

“The goal of these campaigns is to make journalists think twice before asking a question or publishing information”, David Alandete, former deputy director of El País said. “Thanks to campaigns on Twitter by groups such as Wikileaks, the Russian media, certain political parties or the independence movement in Catalonia, we are seeing a worrying trend of self-censorship, with people starting to think twice before reporting anything. This is really worrying”.

“There are no good or bad journalists”, Terribas said. “There are just journalists who are right in the middle of events, be it in Catalonia or Madrid. We have been talking about this (the independence movement in Catalonia) for many years. This conflict began in 2003 with the adoption of the new statute (of Catalonia).



Today, it is 2018, so we have spent 15 long years dealing with this conflict. Everyone simply does their work from their perspective, with their knowledge and in good faith.”

Analysis of the consequences

Virginia Pérez Alonso, co-director of the newspaper Público and president of the PDLI, cast the consequences of online harassment against female journalists in terms of information diversity: “We are in a society in which female voices are less heard than male voices because men are predominant in the structures of power, structures that women find hard to join and to be heard by. If at that point women refrain from making certain comments or publishing information, we are depriving citizens of access to other voices.”

Work-related impact

The media that participated in this study do not usually question the work of journalists who are subject to indiscriminate attacks on social media, and are accustomed to making available the necessary legal or psychological services. However, one of the most common effects of online harassment is, in extreme cases, diminishing the confidence of the affected journalists.

“Journalists fear we will be ‘punished’ by our employer when there is an avalanche of bad criticism because in many cases what they (the harassers) ask for is our dismissal”, Maldonado explained. The El Español journalist expressed aloud a fear that was shared by most of the interviewees, and especially by freelance journalists, even though it is not supported by the facts. Most of the media, including El Español, have stood by their journalists in the face of waves of insults and external threats.

Maldonado’s statement exemplifies, on the one hand, the emotional impact of these types of attacks on journalists – and especially women journalists because of the virulence of the messages – and, on the other hand, the impact on their work, the fear that their reputation as journalists will be damaged, and with it their professional career.

As part of the mission that IPI and PDLI carried out, three focus groups were organized: two with freelance journalists (one in Madrid and another in Barcelona), and one focused on women journalists. These meetings were held according to Chatham House rules, according to which the contents of the meetings can be published but cannot be attributed. The idea is that protecting the identity of the participants favours dialogue.

“There is a fear that they will not assign me other tasks because in their opinion I could be a problematic, conflictive or radical person”, one freelance journalist said. “And I do not consider myself that way, but it is the way others perceive you.”

Online harassment is especially damaging to freelance journalists because social media are a tool intimately linked to their professional success. "Freelance journalists cannot live without the networks", another journalist said. "That's where the universities that later hire me for their summer courses, the publishers that order books, etc., see me."

Social media pages also often constitute a journalist's letter of presentation. One of the journalists pointed out that the image that media managers and editors have of them depends to a large extent on the image that others construct of them on social media.

"Online harassment is serious because you need to stand out on the Internet to get more work", another freelancer explained. "When I suffered it, the Internet and social media were still the platforms on which I worked. I could not close my Twitter account because I lived from that."

"In this sense, online harassment creates poverty", another freelance journalist who has witnessed how the avalanche of attacks has been a determining factor in reducing the number of her collaborations said. "It is radical economic aggression since we are left out on the street, without a salary."

Personal cost

In the insults and threats that occur in the virtual world, unlike abuse in the real world, the person subjected to intimidation is dehumanized. As the object of aggression is a by-line, a face on television or a voice on the radio, it seems that there is no real person behind the personal account of a journalist. As Maldonado pointed out: "(The digital harassers) forget that we also wake up in the morning, that we have families, that things hurt us."

Therefore, a threat stays with the person, beyond the medium (online or offline) through which it has been issued. Pepa Bueno provided a detailed explanation of this phenomenon, comparing the emotional impact of these threat campaigns to the phases of a fight: "First you ignore; then you have a moment of strong indignation in which you are tempted to respond, or just to block the person; then, you learn to detect a threat that goes beyond words and bring it to the attention of the police; finally, you learn to distance yourself. You tell yourself that 'that' exists, and you learn to live with it."

Despite everything, Bueno argued that learning to distance oneself is not a simple process: "To seal ourselves off from this we need a muscle that we have not trained. There are days when you say, 'I will not look at the notifications'. If you have a difficult day, you do not feel like facing it."

The fact that harassment on social media is conceived by journalists as a further toll they must pay for practising their profession means that the process from the start of the harassment until the journalist is aware of the emotional fallout takes time. "It took me a lot to recognize myself as a victim and that the threats on social media have an effect on your physical life", Lara Siscar said.



Siscar suffered harassment on social media for more than two years before she dared to report her case to the police in 2015. The police arrested two harassers who had created over thirty profiles on different networks to threaten and intimidate her. In January of this year, Siscar reported a new case of online harassment. This time, a user had usurped her identity on Twitter.

In the same vein, another journalist said that “you end up thinking that my visibility was bad and that I was asking for it”. In her case, the continued harassment led to her not even being able to turn on the computer to write. “They gave me anxiety attacks”, she explained.

Given this psychological pressure, some of the journalists who took part in the focus groups said that they were often pushed to ponder each of the words they write or to limit their interactions on social media. In extreme cases, that pressure can lead to self-censorship.

“Yes, I think that self-censorship is the order of the day”, one journalist said. “Even though I try to say what I want to say with the greatest possible elegance because you know that it is unbearable to spend three days reading insults.”

Analysis of the practices adopted by newsrooms and journalists

Registration and community management

The fact that a user cannot comment on the articles of online media without registering reduces the number of aggressive comments against journalists. During the registration process to allow users to comment, users usually have to provide information such as their first and last names, their ID, email, place of residence and age.

As explained by Izaskun Pérez, social media manager of the broadcaster Cadena SER: “Years ago users also had to choose a ‘nickname’, but we realized that, if people used a pseudonym instead of their first and last names, they were more likely to leave insulting comments against journalists. Obviously, we do not double-check the data they send us, but the need to register has significantly reduced the number of ‘trolls’ we have on our platforms.”

ARA, a newspaper published in Catalonia, has had a similar experience. In its case, users must have a monthly subscription (after the first 30 days of free trial) to be able to comment on the articles. As it turned out, the subscribers started making more moderate comments since they introduced this system.

There are two main strategies for managing comments. On the one hand, media organizations can outsource this function to specialized companies. This is the case, among others, of PRISA Radio. According to Pérez, the company that manages the comments uses a double filter to approve and publish a comment:

The message first goes through automatic filtering before a manual decision is made about which comments to publish.

Automatic filtering is done by means of software that classifies comments into empty, spam and “white” comments (those that meet the terms of use of the forum). The programme also identifies comments with words related to current issues (names of politicians, campaigns, hashtags, etc.). The latter pass on to another phase where each comment is analysed manually before a decision on its publication is made.

There are two cases in which the company contacts the editing team of the website:

1. If there are comments containing harassment or threats
2. If there are questionable comments, i.e. comments that could be published but that require an editorial decision. In this case, those responsible for the web edition make the decision.

The company to which Cadena SER outsources the management of comments uses the “karma factor” within its automatic moderation system. This system rewards users who write constructive comments. When a user sends a new comment, the system analyses his or her history. If previous comments have been previously blocked because of insults, threats or similar, the filters are much stricter than for those users who have had good behaviour so far.

The second option is to centralize the management of the comments in the editorial office itself. This is the case with ARA. Although to speed up the process they first use software that scans each comment to detect keywords, whether insults or others, management is done manually to a large extent. I.e., even when the software has detected a keyword, the comment is supervised by a member of the ARA web team, and he or she decides whether to publish it or not. The newspaper usually approves 75 percent of the comments it receives, and the editorial office only receives the filtered messages.

El País also has a company with a large team that manages the comments. Beyond approving or rejecting the comments, the editors decide to close the comments for some articles so as not to encourage campaigns to intimidate and discredit their journalists. As noted by former deputy editor David Alandete, there are some articles, such as opinion pieces, which they automatically close to comments, “because we do not want to have on our website pieces that house attacks orchestrated against a member of El País”.

As a result of efforts to block insults and threats in web forums, campaigns to harass and discredit journalists are frequently transferred to social media.

In these cases, El Español, which has a strong Facebook community, hides all insulting or violent comments, whether directed at journalists or other readers. According to Ana Delgado, the community manager, the

news site adopted this measure because it wanted “to be a website that has a quality dialogue. We do not censor; any criticism is accepted as long as it is respectful.”

Delgado also said that sometimes the users themselves corner and expel the haters: “We have a very loyal community that helps us keep the haters at bay. They argue against them (aggressors) themselves. We limit ourselves to supervising the conversation, and when there are insults, they are hidden”.

However, Twitter is more complicated to manage, Delgado said. El Español has adopted the position of “not feeding the trolls or haters”. “We do not interact with users (on Twitter)”, Delgado explained. “The journalists themselves, if they want, can interact with them on their own personal accounts. We do not have a clear policy on personal accounts”.

ARA follows a similar strategy. At first, they considered interacting with users on Twitter but dropped the idea. They only speak out against very aggressive campaigns and usually respond in a very neutral way.

Support measures

Colleagues are usually the first resource to which journalists turn in search of advice. Pepa Bueno told IPI: “Lately, we started to share strategies when we tell each other in the newsroom: What do you do? How do you react? How are you doing?”

In this regard, Lara Siscar has become a contact person among her fellow editors: “More and more colleagues come to me for advice because I am one of the pioneers in reporting this type of harassment.”

While peer support is essential to minimize the emotional impact of these attacks, the unequivocal support of the news company for which they work is essential.

Media organizations such as the newspapers El País and La Vanguardia or Catalunya Ràdio have social media teams that provide initial support to the journalist so that he or she knows how to act when attacked. Sometimes, these teams even react to attacks on social media directly. The action protocols used by these three media organizations in case of harassment have several points in common:

1. The journalist should approach the social media team.
2. The social media team determines the seriousness of the case and in case of doubt seeks legal advice.
3. If the case is serious, social media platforms are asked to withdraw the comment through the protocols they have enabled for this.
4. The messages are then saved and the case is sent to legal counsel and human resources to begin the legal procedure to lodge a complaint.

At El País and La Vanguardia, these actions are coordinated with the newsroom council (the body representing the interests of journalists in front of the management), as well as with management.

In media organizations whose structure is smaller, reporting and action mechanisms are more informal. They often use WhatsApp or Slack groups to report cases of harassment and discuss how to react to them.

The prevention and analysis mechanisms for online attacks are important to reduce the emotional and professional impact on journalists. One of the measures that Público developed to find out if the digital harassment influences the journalists themselves was to send an anonymous questionnaire to members of the newsroom. In the questionnaire the journalists were asked the following points:

1. If they had been harassed online. If yes, what type of harassment they suffered;
2. If they felt supported by the company;
3. If they felt supported by their colleagues; and
4. If they reported the abuse, and what role they believed the media organization should play in these cases.

“We are still analysing these responses and are encouraging a conversation in our newsroom to ensure that all journalists, and especially women, feel that we support them”, Co-Deputy Editor Virginia Pérez Alonso.

The training of journalists and other team members in these types of online attacks is essential. Catalunya Ràdio explained to IPI how it uses training courses in social media, although these are not so much focused on how to act in cases of threats, but on their personal management at a professional level.

2.5. United Kingdom

Over the course of five days in September 2018, the IPI delegation met with managing editors; online and social media editors; and heads of audience engagement and communities at a variety of media outlets, as well as with freelance journalists, to better online harassment and how it is dealt with in the UK. IPI visited the newsrooms of the British public broadcaster BBC, the news agency Reuters, national newspapers the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Times and the Daily Mirror, as well as Reach PLC, the publisher of numerous regional newspapers. In addition, IPI organized a focus group for freelance journalists and met with the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Becky Gardiner, a senior lecturer at Goldsmiths.

Meetings concentrated on diverse types of mechanisms for dealing with online harassment, including proactive and reactive measures taken by the newsrooms, community and social media management, and psychosocial and peer support.

The majority of the newsrooms that IPI visited in London had first-hand experience of online harassment against their journalists. The amount of online vitriol that UK journalists encounter on a regular basis has led many media organizations to draft recommendations and step-by-step guidelines for journalists and their managers. These guidelines aim at preventing online harassment and helping the journalists recover from it. They also advise on when to escalate potential threats to the safety of journalists to the point of involving top management and/or law enforcement.

Analysis of the context

The majority of the newsrooms that IPI visited in London had first-hand experience of online harassment against their journalists. The amount of online vitriol that UK journalists encounter on a regular basis has led many media organizations to draft recommendations and step-by-step guidelines for journalists and their managers. These guidelines aim at preventing online harassment and helping the journalists recover from it. They also advise on when to escalate potential threats to the safety of journalists to the point of involving top management and/or law enforcement.

In general, online harassment campaigns against journalists in the UK are triggered by topics that have proven flammable across Europe, including immigration and right-wing political groups and actors. One particular topic that has prompted harassment of journalists is anything related to Brexit, the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, which has divided the nation.

UK newsrooms say that journalists who make regular on-air appearances on television or radio as hosts or commentators as the most likely to receive harassment. Women journalists are particularly at risk, as

are journalists belonging to minority groups. In most cases, abuse against journalists takes place through emails, phone calls or posts on social media or the comment sections on news websites.

Many of the newsrooms with which IPI spoke reported having had at least one situation that required involvement of law enforcement to ensure a journalist's physical safety. Editors said they felt the police still needed for resources for and knowledge of online harassment to be better able to assess threats reported by journalists.

Online harassment is seen as having an impact on journalists' psychological well-being and ability to work. "Often it becomes almost impossible for the journalists to do their stories because the noise of the abuse drowns out the opportunity to reach and engage a wider audience with their journalism", one social media editor said.

Editors said some journalists leave social media at least temporarily because of online harassment, sometimes on the suggestion of their managers. Online harassment is also said to make it harder to get journalist to engage in conversations with the audience on social media.

To a certain degree, online harassment also affects which stories journalists cover. Targeted journalists may be taken off a specific beat that has triggered harassment. Some editors said they debated whether it was better to share the burden of the effects of covering certain topics among several journalists or whether this practice served to increase the number of journalists affected by online harassment. However, none of the managers or journalists with whom IPI spoke said that online harassment caused a significant amount of self-censorship.

Analysis of the problem and consequences

Female journalists

One of the most notorious harassment cases in the UK involved the BBC's first female political editor, Laura Kuenssberg. Kuenssberg was targeted with abusive messages online to the extent that the BBC employed a bodyguard for her during the UK's 2017 general election campaign. The general perception in the UK is that female journalists are subject to more online harassment than their male colleagues. Female journalists who make regular appearances as hosts or commentators in news or current affairs programmes on TV are at particular risk for harassment. Another group seen as facing online abuse is younger female journalists reporting and writing opinion pieces on issues related to gender and feminism.

This perception was backed by recent research conducted by Becky Gardiner, a senior lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a former comment editor at the Guardian. Gardiner analysed comments that moderators had blocked from the comment section of the Guardian's online version. These

comments were often abusive or dismissive. The study found that articles written by women attracted more blocked comments than those written by men.

This effect was seen regardless of the subject of the article, but the effect was heightened if the articles ran in sections of the site that tended to attract more male readers. Female journalists that IPI interviewed in the UK confirmed that they were more likely to receive dismissive or abusive comments if they wrote about subjects perceived by society to be more male-oriented, such as technology.

Online harassment can have an effect on which stories female journalists choose to cover. Some female journalists told IPI they had chosen not to report on certain topics, like the harassment of women, or had forwarded those stories to their male colleagues to avoid being harassed themselves.

“It ultimately puts me out of pocket because no one will know that it was me who gave him the story”, one female journalist said. “But it is not worth the hassle to go on with the story.”

Women journalists’ networks are seen as important in coping with online harassment. At the time of IPI’s visit, these networks were generally comprised of informal, closed groups on social media, for example. However, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) noted that it was looking into establishing an official women journalists’ network in the UK.

Freelancers

IPI conducted a focus group meeting with freelance journalists on its visit to London in September 2018. The freelancers participating in the focus group included one male and several female journalists who collaborated with a variety of media organizations from leading newspapers to niche magazines.

During the focus group, freelancers highlighted the lack of a formal support network or formal guidelines for responding to online harassment as a major hurdle.

“I feel so much more vulnerable than a staff writer, even though I don’t write about certain hot topics”, one freelancer said.

The freelancers said they often encounter online harassment on social media when sourcing stories or asking for interviews. One freelancer noted that if she were a staff member, she would be able to go the newsroom team and talk about such incidents. As a freelancer, she is left alone with these experiences, which she felt could increase the impact of harassment.

The UK newsrooms that IPI visited largely expressed a commitment to providing support to freelancers, with many stating that they did so already. The freelancers in the focus group, however, said they were largely unaware of such support. Most of them said they had not received advice on how to prevent or

report online harassment. One interviewee proposed that media organizations send their guidelines regarding online harassment along other documents whenever they collaborate with a new freelancer.

The freelancers also told IPI that they generally resort to peer support to protect themselves from online harassment. This support includes sharing knowledge of digital safety measures with one another, such as tips for protecting their email and social media accounts from hackers, and muting abusive users. To make this information easier to access, some freelancers suggested creating a consortium that would provide freelancer journalists and other journalists with a set of guidelines.

Analysis of practices adopted by newsrooms and journalists

Step-by-step guidelines

Several UK newsrooms that IPI visited in London had introduced or were in the process of adopting recommendations for journalists and managers to follow when online harassment occurs. Most of these recommendations include both preventive and reactive measures. The guidelines, which were shared with IPI, aim to give newsrooms clear steps to follow as well as a clear chain of command when dealing with incidences of harassment.

The guidelines often start by identifying the diverse forms of threats and harassment and then provide recommendations for journalists and managers on when and how to escalate them. If a journalist receives an insulting message on social media, for example, he or she is advised to screenshot it, report it to the newsroom and to the social media platform, and mute or block the user. If the harassment involves severe safety threats, such as death threats, journalists are encouraged to report it immediately and together with their line manager contact office security and/or the police.

Most guidelines put an emphasis on reporting harassment to a colleague or manager within the news organization. Doing so not only is seen to help journalists share the burden, but it also allows newsrooms to document harassment. Journalists are usually encouraged to contact their line managers or social media leads within the newsroom. Some newsrooms have also put in place reporting tools, such as a special email address to report online harassment, through which help is available around the clock. Journalists are generally advised to save the abusive messages they may receive for reporting and possible evidentiary purposes.

One newsroom said it planned to adopt a database into which all harassment cases could be logged in detail. This newsroom saw such detailed and systematized reporting as a tool to keep track of cases, follow up on them with journalists and better understanding harassment patterns.

Frequently, these recommendations advise journalists that certain types of online attacks, such as doxing, can be better avoided if journalists take preventive measures, which include securing social media and email accounts and updating privacy settings. Journalists are also advised to ensure that their home address or telephone number is not available anywhere they don't want it to be.

One preventive measure is simply having the guidelines ready so that the whole newsroom knows how to respond to online harassment and help colleagues who experience it. The guidelines are generally included in training for managers and new employees, but they are also found in a prominent place in the company's intranet, serving as a reminder for journalists that help is available.

Overall, UK newsrooms try to offer multiple channels to report harassment to ease discomfort around do so. Editors said that journalists in a competitive working environment may feel uncomfortable telling managers or colleagues about harassment and that in such situations more indirect or discreet reporting channels can be effective. Nevertheless, the editors with whom IPI spoke emphasized their commitment to improving newsroom culture so that journalists feel comfortable coming forward with their experience of harassment.

Formal and informal peer support

While several UK newsrooms have put in place formal training systems to offer peer support, journalists themselves have also come up with informal ways to share the burden of online attacks. All in all, the aim of peer support mechanisms is to make sure that no one is left to suffer online harassment in silence and that there are diverse points of access to help.

Some UK newsrooms that IPI visited have put in place voluntary trauma risk and mental health trainings for newsroom staff to better recognize and manage possible mental health problems. These peer support systems are based on the trauma risk management (TRIM) method originating from the UK military and on the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) programme. TRIM aims to prevent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whereas MHFA is more focused on mental health problems in general. Both models train non-healthcare staff to monitor and offer initial help for a person who has experienced a traumatic incident, such as online harassment.

TRIM is based on structured conversations where TRIM-trained newsroom staff members seek to assess whether the targeted journalist shows symptoms of PTSD. The assessment is done by asking journalists questions about changes in their eating, sleeping or alcohol consumption habits. The targeted journalists are then walked through ways to come to terms with the trauma and directed to health care if needed. TRIM consists of two discussion sessions: The first one should take place within 48 hours after the person experiences or reports the traumatic incident, with a follow-up one month later. If these discussions point

to the development of PTSD symptoms, the person is encouraged and assisted to seek a professional assessment in order to access any specific treatment he or she requires.

The MHFA training provides newsroom staff members with the knowledge to recognize warning signs of mental health problems and with the skills to offer initial support to their colleagues affected by online abuse and threats until the person can be directed to appropriate professional help or until the crisis resolves.

These peer support systems normally allow affected journalists to contact any staff member they wish if they do not feel comfortable talking about certain issues with their line manager, for example. This measure has been taken to make it easier for journalists to seek support even if the abuse they experienced involves sensitivities.

In some newsrooms, digital and social media editors regularly meet with different news teams to have a “health check” on their work related to social media. These checks every two to three months give the teams a possibility to bring up issues that they face in their everyday work and are a way of communicating that there are support mechanisms in place whenever needed.

In terms of collegial support, the guidelines advise the managers to offer a targeted journalist the possibility to let one of his or her newsroom colleagues read the abusive messages and to monitor his or her email and social media accounts. This way, exposure to the attack can be minimized but someone can still alert the journalist in case of a serious threat to his or her safety.

Journalists have also found informal ways to support their colleagues affected by online harassment. Editors whom IPI interviewed said that many journalists spontaneously discuss online abuse with their colleagues who experienced it previously. These experts-by-experience can also be invited to talk about the issue with new employees or share their stories on the company’s intranet.

Peer support and other support channels may be harder to access for journalists working remotely or for teams working in different locations. One way to tackle this issue is informal messaging groups in which journalists can talk about things they encounter in their everyday work and to share this burden in a humorous way. However, journalists said it was important to be able to mute these conversations on their free time.

Social media

Several newsrooms that IPI visited in the UK have issued social media guidelines that include recommended safety measures to prevent online harassment and blunt its impact.

These guidelines start with basic preventive measures when using these platforms. Journalists are advised to check their privacy settings, use two-factor authentication to avoid hacking and set their profile to private mode if needed.

Journalists who receive abusive messages or threats are told to screenshot them, report them to social media platforms and mute or block the user. Some newsrooms have also organized trainings on these measures. If journalists receive outright threats on social media, they are urged to report them to the news organization so that their managers can escalate the threats if needed. As a last resort, journalists may be suggested to come off social media, at least for a period of time, to allow the situation to cool off.

Often, guidelines also include tips for engaging with the audience on social media. Some journalists have tried to tackle online harassment by sharing abusive comments or engaging with the abusers, but most newsrooms advise journalists to avoid these measures for fear of attracting further harassment.

Some media organizations have explicitly advised their managers that audience engagement or social media activity should not be an obligation for journalists. Some newsrooms said they had advised managers to consult journalists before linking their social media accounts to a story. The perception is that online harassment may increase if the author's social media account is only a click away.

Most of the newsrooms IPI visited expressed an urgent need for more cooperation with social media platforms to better tackle harassment. Editors said they felt left alone in the face of online attacks. They expressed a desire for social media platforms to provide more direct assistance to newsrooms, such as an emergency hotline to contact, more help to monitor and shut down harassment campaigns, more possibilities to track their reports of abusive messages and the ability to turn off commenting on Facebook posts about inflammatory subjects. Some newsrooms have put in place social media teams who contact the social media platform in the case of severe online harassment campaigns.

Comment sections

The comment sections of online news sites are one of the arenas where journalists may become targets of abuse and vitriol. Though not all comment threads include outright insults or threats, comments undermining a journalist's professionalism are seen as equally disturbing in the long term. To tackle this issue, media organizations in the UK have adopted various measures to better manage and moderate the comments on their websites.

Most media organizations that IPI visited in the UK operate their comment sections on a post-moderation basis. The decision to post-moderate is partly informed by the legal situation in the UK and the liability of publishers for what is posted. Moderation is based on the media organization's community standards.

Post moderation relies largely on commentators' vigilance. Some newsrooms also use artificial intelligence to block comments containing abusive language. Journalists and newsroom staff can also flag comments breaching community standards, such as comments threatening or insulting the writer of the story.

Stricter moderation measures, such as pre-moderation or closing the comment section for certain stories, is occasionally put in place if the writer of the article previously faced online harassment or if the subject of the story is identified as particularly incendiary (e.g., Brexit, terrorism, mental health). Commenting is usually completely turned off only in stories detailing ongoing court cases. Some newsrooms have, however, started to pick more carefully which stories are open for comments. The objective of this measure is to enhance meaningful conversations.

Moderation teams try to keep an eye on patterns so as to detect organized attacks on journalists. Messages threatening the safety of journalists are escalated within the media organization, but such outright threats are seldom issued in the comment sections.

Media organizations are able to ban commentators who severely violate their community standards, but this measure is taken only occasionally. Bans are issued only for a brief period of time, ranging from one to three months in most cases. Permanent bans are issued only in extreme cases. Newsrooms are also looking into measures with which they could prevent the same users from creating several accounts, e.g., by blocking their IP address. On some sites, users with a dubious comment history can be flagged so that their messages always pass through pre-moderation.

Some of the media organizations IPI interviewed have outsourced moderation, but others stressed the importance of having moderators and editorial staff work in the same location. Moderation teams often have plenty of silent knowledge that can be shared with journalists when planning which stories to open for commenting and how journalists can take part in the conversation.

In some cases, newsrooms actively work to improve the quality of the conversations on their site. Some media organizations encourage their journalists to engage in conversations with their readers in the comment section and have provided journalists guidelines for doing so. A journalist's presence below the line is perceived as a factor that improves the quality of the conversations and helps to take heat off the debate, though some journalists are reluctant to partake in this exercise.

3. Recommendations On Newsrooms Measures

Recommendations based on the best practices collected during the working visits to newsrooms across Europe.

3.1. Recommendations for media outlets and editors

Creating a culture in the newsroom that encourages journalists to report online violence and that reduces any stigmatization or victimization around doing so is essential to combat the emotional and professional toll that harassment can have. Many journalists, especially freelancers, have either already “accepted” this phenomenon or do not report threats or abuse in order to avoid being stigmatized.

Women journalists, who are doubly targeted for their work and gender, often endure online abuse for a long time before reporting it. Patriarchal structures in newsrooms and in journalism itself may contribute to a reluctance to come forward with cases of abuse.

Without a healthy culture of safety in the newsroom, cases of online harassment – including those that have a profound impact on journalists’ professional and personal lives – will go unreported. The associated risk of self-censorship, which may be seen as the only way to prevent future attacks, harbours profound negative consequences for the free flow of information in democratic societies.

Prevention

Communications

- Acknowledge online harassment as a problem. In this vein, consider an attack against a journalist is an attack against the entire media organization. This is an important foundation to build on a healthy safety culture within the newsroom.
- Issue clear, simple guidelines to follow both for those targeted with online harassment and media managers. Though the approach to each case should be shaped ad hoc, it is important to have in place a series of clear, simple steps to tackle this issue. Ensure all news contributors, including stringers and freelancers, are informed about and regularly reminded of said policy.
- Discuss regularly in editorial meetings about online abuse, normalizing the fact of speaking out about them. This strategy is helpful in creating a conducive safety environment in the newsroom.



- Send the safety guidelines to newly arrived journalists, both staffers and freelancers, and inform them about the support mechanism and the point person or newsroom unit they should refer to.
- Send regular reminders of the guidelines and especially ahead of the publication of sensitive stories.
- Update regularly these policies to best fit emerging needs of the organization and technical tools available.
- Distribute once a year an anonymous survey within your team to evaluate the existing measures in place as well as the perceived level of danger. This survey can include the following points:
 - Whether journalists have experienced harassment
 - The types of harassment and threats they have been subject to
 - Whether they feel supported by the media outlet
 - Whether they feel supported by colleagues
 - What role the media outlet should play in reporting harassment to the police

Support mechanisms

- Put in place a support system. This requires developing the internal structures for reporting and swiftly reacting to the attacks based on the guidelines provided for journalists and media managers. Exercises should be carried out to identify gaps or areas of improvement.
- Provide training for editors, moderators and journalists alike on trauma risk management, awareness of online harassment and digital safety. Training should be carried out regularly due to the constantly changing nature of digital attacks (hacking attempts, phishing, etc.) and online abuse (insults, threats, doxing, smear campaigns). Training should also include journalists who have been previously targeted and can share their first-hand experience regarding coping mechanisms. Freelance journalists who regularly cooperate with the media outlet should be included in the training.
- Create a unit in the newsroom (one or more staff members) responsible for tracking cases of harassment and coordinating elements involved in the response.
- Evaluate trends and foresee potential online threats. Although online abuse can be triggered by any topic, research shows that certain topics are more likely to draw abuse, including politics, immigration, religion, human rights and gender inequality. These topics differ from country to country.
- Create easy-to-access reporting mechanisms integrated with already existing channels of communications to facilitate the use of these reporting mechanisms. Use instant messaging or similar



apps to communicate with the responsible unit. Protocols, or standard operating procedure, should be in place to guide such reporting.

- Create a database to log threats and attacks on journalists and the actions adopted to address them. This database is useful for tracking cases and their current status – e.g., status of the police investigation, whether the target is receiving psychological or other support – and for evaluating the efficiency of the measures implemented.
- Create a peer-support network. This can be as simple as setting up a group in an instant messaging app. Ensuring that staff members are trained in trauma management will increase the effectiveness of such a network.
- Develop mentorship programmes. Assign a more experienced journalist to support new colleagues, especially those assigned to hot-button topics. Such programmes can help journalists avoid the usual triggers that ignite harassment while also encouraging them to keep writing instead of resorting to self-censorship.

Audience Moderation

- User registration systems might deter abusers from posting damaging comments. Most of the media organizations surveyed that have introduced a registration system for posting comments have seen a reduction in the number of abusive comments on the website.

Sample of registration scheme:

- Name and last name
 - Email and double verification
 - City, county and postal code
 - Date of birth
- One of the factors that helps prevent the emotional and professional impact of online harassment against journalists is their level of exposure to threats. Some of the preventive measures that media organizations can adopt is an efficient management system of the comments on their own website. Software solutions based on machine learning to pre-moderate on-site comments in the media website have proven efficient. Most of these solutions allow manual post-moderation to ensure that software does not disproportionately impinge upon freedom of expression.
 - Develop clear community guidelines, which are important for both users and moderators. Aggressive comments toward journalists should be closely analysed by moderators to determine whether they breach



the media company's community guidelines. Decisions about whether to remove comments attacking a journalist should take into account various factors, including the perspective of the journalist.

Reaction

- When journalists report incidents of online harassment, editors and/or managers should provide a quick response acknowledging the issue so as to ease the initial emotional impact. This response can come via a short email or mobile message and should ideally communicate support and understand as well as an offer to provide relevant response measures.
- Document the abuse, in particular by storing screenshots, URLs, downloaded videos or gifs. An editor or a colleague of the affected journalist should undertake this task. Removing this burden from the journalist helps minimize the emotional impact.
- Carry out two types of risk assessment: one regarding the threat level from the post or message, and one regarding the emotional impact on the targeted journalists. These risks will not always correlate. This assessment should involve, where possible, the digital security team, the editor or line manager, the legal team and the journalist.
- Based on the risk assessment, decide in coordination with the journalist the best course of action. These can include:
 - Making the abuse/threats public. In this case, the media organization should publicly support the journalist and make clear that an attack against a journalist is an attack against the entire media organization.
 - Reporting the abuse/threat to the police. This decision should ideally be coordinated with the media organization's legal advisers.
 - In extreme cases, relocating the journalist or implementing other urgent safety measures, such as a bodyguard or security cameras near the journalist's home.
 - Temporarily reassigning the journalist to another beat.
 - Psychological support
 - Allowing the journalist to temporarily go offline. This decision should not be forced by the media organization.
 - Allowing the targeted journalist to report, at least temporarily, without a byline.
- For threats/abuse via social media platforms, report cases to these platforms. Although these companies response may be inadequate, they normally log an incident report that can later be retrieved in case the journalist or media organization decides to take legal action.



- Consider engaging in online counter speech, in particular as a form of peer support. Demonstrations of public support by colleagues can help create a sense of community.
- Journalists targeted by online attacks can experience a myriad of emotions including anger, distress, rage or sadness, which may impact their performance at work. Be very clear that this is not their fault nor is online abuse something that journalists should have to endure. Let journalists know that having these feelings is understandable.
- Regularly follow up with the affected journalist to receive updates and provide updates on emotional toll, legal case or police investigation.

3.2. Recommendations for Journalists

Prevention

- Read your media organization's online safety guidelines, which may change periodically.
- Join peer support structures within the newsroom. Even if you have not personally experienced harassment, you can offer support to those who have.

Reaction

- In the event of immediate danger or physical threat:
 - If you are away from the newsroom, contact the police immediately, and then contact your editor and the responsible newsroom unit.
 - Document the harassment. Where possible, have someone else do this for you. Avoiding excessive exposure to harassment can help reduce the resulting distress.
 - If you are in the newsroom, contact your editor immediately and the responsible unit. Stay in the newsroom until adequate measures have been put in place and contact your family.
- If you are repeatedly harassed online:
 - Contact your editor and the responsible unit to coordinate the best response in your case.
 - Consider if you want to respond to the abusive comments. Most experts suggest avoiding further engagement with users. However, if you choose to respond publicly, coordinate with your social media manager or head of audience so they can provide support.

- Use humour to counter abusive messages. While feeding trolls is generally not advisable, humorous or ironic comments can help diffuse the vitriol.
 - Check the safety guidelines on social media platforms on how best to protect your account.
 - Try to see online harassment as a larger phenomenon that goes beyond your case and that aims at silencing certain forms of expression. Depersonalizing online harassment is an important step to easing the emotional and professional impact.
- If your colleagues are targeted: Participate in peer support mechanisms to let the targeted journalist that she is not alone.

3.3. Recommendations for States

- Raise awareness among public officials, particularly police and judicial authorities about relevant aspects of online harassment, insults and threats, and which legal remedies are available for journalists targeted with online abuse.
- Encourage coordination and mutual understanding among the police, prosecutors and media organizations.
- Assign a dedicated prosecutor, or team of prosecutors, to deal with online threats. Consider gender balance in the selection of the prosecutors due to the often-sexualized nature of online attacks on women.
- Create a country-wide direct helpline for journalists, media organizations and journalists to report online abuse.
- Create an independently managed legal counselling and legal defence fund for journalists targeted with online harassment.
- Ensure public condemnation and prosecution of any member of government or member of any state institution who has either directly issued insulting and threatening messages against journalists or incited and encouraged others to do so.
- Create a database on the number of abusive comments, its content, and details of the targeted journalists.
- Publish regularly reports and analysis on collected data and cases; inform the relevant authorities about these findings.

4. List Of Media And Other Organizations That Contributed To This Study

Finland: Åbo Underrättelser, Iltalehti, Ilta-Sanomat, Maaseudun Tulevaisuus, Turun Sanomat, Turkulainen, Helsingin Sanomat, Uusi Suomi, Yle; Journalists Union of Finland; freelance focus group

Poland: Do Rzeczy, Gazeta Wyborcza; Krytyka Polityczna, OKO.press, Polityka, Res Publica Nowa; freelance focus group

Germany: ARD, Deutsche Welle, Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA), Spiegel Online, ZDF; Deutsche Presserat; Hostwriter

Spain: Cadena SER, Catalunya Ràdio, eldiario.es, El Español, El Mundo, El País, La Vanguardia, La Sexta TV, Público, RTVE; Federation of Journalist Unions (FeSP), Union of Journalists of Catalonia; freelance focus group

United Kingdom: BBC, The Daily Mirror, The Guardian, Reach PLC, Reuters, The Telegraph, The Times; National Union of Journalists (NUJ); freelance focus group