ONTHELINE NEWSROOMS
DEFENDING PRESS FREEDOM

Protocol for newsrooms to support journalists targeted with online harassment

International Press Institute (IPI)

Introduction

Online harassment and attacks on journalists – including threats, insults and smear campaigns – are increasingly deployed as a means to silence journalists and challenge their credibility in the public arena. While addressing online harassment and its negative impact on the free flow of information requires a multi-actor approach, newsrooms have a key role to play in protecting their journalists from the professional and personal harm that harassment can produce. This Protocol outlines specific steps and measures that newsrooms can take.

The measures contained in this Protocol are based on data collected by IPI in the course of in-person visits to 45 newsrooms in five European countries – Finland, Germany, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom – between April and December 2018 as well as meetings with experts from various countries. Altogether, IPI interviewed more than 110 editors, journalists and community managers in addition to legal experts, civil society representatives and academics. As part of the in-country visits, a total of eight focus groups with female journalists and freelancers were held to discuss the impact of online harassment on those groups specifically.

This Protocol, which is published as part of IPI's Newsrooms Ontheline programme, is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all set of instructions but as a starting point for newsroom managers to devise a system that works for their particular circumstances and that can be sustained in the long term.

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Step 1: Reporting

a | Create a culture of safety in the newsroom around online harassment

Management should take all necessary steps to understand the types of attacks that their staff and contributors are facing and to normalize discussions about those attacks.

▶ *Internal memorandum*: Send an email to all staff members making clear that the media organization takes online attacks seriously. This measure is important to build confidence in the newsroom. It sends two important messages: First, it helps to debunk the widespread feeling among journalists that being targeted with abuse on social media is the new normal; and second, it gives journalists a sense of security that the media organization will support them.

▶ *Regularly speak about online abuse in editorial meetings*: One way for editors to raise the issue is simply to informally ask whether any journalists have recently been targeted as well as raise awareness about the risk of attacks when assigning stories that are likely to attract abuse. During a political crisis or civil unrest or ahead of elections, these discussions should be more frequent.

▶ *Distribute an anonymous survey* within the newsroom to take stock of the impact of online harassment and the efficacy of measures in place to combat it.

> *The Spanish online news site Publico.es conducted a staff survey to gauge the impact of abuse on its staff as well as the efficacy of measures it had put in place.*

▶ *Establish regular meetings between social media teams and journalists* to carry out a "**health check**" related to journalists' work on social media or engagement on online comment sections.

▶ *Create an easy-to-access section* within the media outlet's intranet with information about the company's policies on online harassment and the tools and protocols that the company has created to deal with the issue.

> *The BBC features in its intranet educational films in which journalists discuss trauma in the field and its impact on them. The films function as a sort of "beginner's guide" to trauma and help to demystify the issue.*

b | Establish clear reporting lines and reporting channels

All staff members and contributors should know whom to report abuse to and how to report it. Newsrooms should create various channels through which attacks can be easily reported and that allow journalists to access support mechanisms.

Informal reporting mechanisms:

▶ *Encourage informal talks with colleagues*: Newsrooms should encourage journalists to share experiences of harassment with their peers and editors. It should be made clear that speaking openly about online attacks is not a sign of weakness or oversensitivity.

▶ *Create a chat group* on WhatsApp, Messenger or a similar platform (Signal, Telegram, Threema, etc.) where journalists can share incidents of harassment. A common chat space can raise awareness about the issue as well as build a sense of solidarity and community.

Formal reporting mechanisms:

▶ *Create an online form* where targeted journalists can easily report an online attack. The form should be short and easy to fill in, but cover all essential information related to the attack.

▶ *Create a specific email address* where journalists can report online harassment.

Formal reporting mechanisms create an expectation of action. Therefore, it must be made clear to journalists, other staff members, and contributors who is responsible for receiving the reports and what steps that person can take. This person should be knowledgeable about the issue of harassment (ideally having received training) and should enjoy a stature in the newsroom that allows him or her to escalate cases to those in a position to offer a response from the organization.

Regardless of whether the case is judged as needing to be escalated or not, those who report should receive some form of response in order to make it clear that their reports are being heard and to maintain credibility in the mechanism. Finally, considering that women and minorities are disproportionately targets of harassment, newsrooms should ensure that coordinators of reporting mechanisms include representation from these groups and/or have been made sensitive to the specific types of attacks targeting women and minorities.

c	Document instances of online attacks and harassment

This means, on the one hand, that journalists who are targeted in attacks should collect screenshots of the attack and mark down other relevant information. Sufficient documentation is essential to understanding the sources of the attack, to carrying out a risk assessment and to deciding which measures, if any, the media organization should implement. Given the intensity of some attacks, journalists should be encouraged to enlist peers, editors or moderators in the documentation process to ease the burden on themselves.

On the other hand, those responsible for coordinating reporting mechanisms should create a **database to keep track of incidences of online harassment** reported to them and information about the responses taken. This database is important for tracking support measures provided and their efficacy (see additional information under Step 4).

Step 2: Risk Assessment

A thorough risk assessment is important to determine which type of support is the most appropriate in the event of an online attack. The following types of risks should be assessed:

▶ The likelihood that an **online attack turns into a physical attack**.

▶ The **potential emotional impact** on targeted journalists and the impact on their work.

▶ The potential for an online smear campaign to **damage the reputation and credibility** of the journalist and/or news organization.

Those involved in this risk assessment should receive adequate training that allows them to identify the existence of particular criteria and understand when to escalate a given case. Below is a selection of factors that may be used to assess the level of risk. The risk assessment process should also involve the targets of the attacks.

a	Risk of physical harm

Factors to consider:

▶ Overall security environment (frequency of physical attacks on the press, impunity for such attacks, climate of generalized animosity toward the press).

▶ In the case of an individual aggressor, assessment of risk of physical attack based on known information about this individual.

▶ In the case of campaigns, likelihood that individuals will feel encouraged or legitimized to carry out a physical attack.

▶ The public nature of the journalist's work: How recognizable is he or she in public places?

b	Risk of psychological harm

Factors to consider:

External elements:

▶ Intensity of the harassment, both in content and frequency (repeated "low-level" harassment can be damaging).

▶ Presence of discriminatory content (based on gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.), which can have a particularly serious impact on the target.

▶ Presence of traumatic imagery.

▶ Messages that indicate stalking behaviour, which can generate fear and insecurity.

▶ Strength of the target's overall support network.

Internal elements:

▶ Target's psychological state: Signs of depression or trauma.

C Risk of reputational harm

Factors to consider:

▶ Degree of polarization and hostility toward media present in society.

▶ Potential for the smears to be taken credibly by the public.

▶ Volume and reach of attacks and smear campaigns, including factors that can allow online attacks to spread more quickly such as:

  • Use of memes or elaborated graphic designs.
  • Use of botnets.
  • Use of labels and smears that have the potential to be recycled again in the future.
  • Further spreading of attack by disinformation websites.
  • Indication that smear campaigns have been orchestrated on behalf of political, economic or other interests.

The factors above are not exclusive. It is highly recommended that newsrooms invest in professional training to be able to identify physical risk, risk of emotional trauma, and risk of reputational harm, including signs pointing to organized smear campaigns.

Step 3: Implementing Support Mechanisms

This section provides an overview of support mechanisms that can be activated when journalists are targeted with online attacks or harassment. The aim of all of these mechanisms is to ensure that targeted journalists can do their jobs safely.

a Digital security support

This can include, for example:

▶ **Tracing the users behind attacks**, even if they have posted the threats from anonymous accounts on social media.

▶ **Locking down all of the targets' accounts**, changing passwords, etc., in order to minimize risk.

▶ *Editor and colleagues should offer to take over the target's social media accounts* so that the target is not exposed to further abuse.

Preventive measures:

▶ **Make journalists aware about personal details** that are accessible to the public through social media accounts. See if any sensitive information has been exposed involuntarily.

▶ **Train journalists to scan their electronic devices** to identify potential vulnerabilities that might allow hackers to access their personal data and publicly expose it.

b Legal support

The decision whether or not to pursue legal action in response to online harassment should be taken in consideration of a number of factors. These include:

▶ Whether the post contains illegal content according to your jurisdiction.

▶ The likelihood that bringing a case will deter future online aggressors in general.

▶ The likelihood that bringing a case will deter the actions of the specific aggressor in this case.

▶ The possibility that, given the particular context, pursuing legal action will spotlight the particular journalist and amplify and encourage further attacks.

▶ Whether legal action could unwittingly reinforce stories that online aggressors may already be selling about "powerful" media organizations attacking the "little guy", and thereby potentially further additional harassment.

▶ Whether the attack appears to have been perpetrated by an individual acting alone or participating in a coordinated campaign. In the latter case, legal action may be counterproductive and fuel further attacks.

▶ The potential impact on the journalist affected: Will a legal case bring satisfaction to the affected journalist, or will it cause further emotional harm?

▶ Whether prosecutors have also taken up a

criminal case, in which case it may be easier to support that effort.

> **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE**: IPI's Newsrooms Ontheline website features a **video series** on what to keep in mind when considering <u>filing a legal claim</u>

C Emotional and psychological support

Professional psychological support

Professional mental health support can play an important role in helping mitigate the consequences of online abuse and harassment of journalists. As a best practice, media outlets should ensure that journalists have access to mental health care either through the organization's health plan or through ad hoc arrangements made between the media outlet and mental health professionals.

Peer support

For journalists targeted with online abuse and harassment, colleagues who have endured similar experience can be an important source of strength as well as knowledge regarding how to best cope with the attacks and their potential consequences.

▶ *Structured peer support networks*: Develop a formal network of staff members in the newsroom who are available to listen to the experiences of their peers who have been targeted with online abuse and walk them through ways of coping with the effects. Ideally, staff members who participate in these schemes should have specific training on how to perform a trauma assessment through structured conversations and be able to divert the journalist to the relevant actors within the newsroom who can facilitate healthcare assistance as well as other types of support such as legal counselling, audience moderation, digital security or other safety mechanisms.

> *Explore the Dart Center's <u>in-depth analysis of peer support network</u> and its implementation on Australian Broadcasting Corporation.*
>
> *Explore the <u>BBC's</u> peer support network.*
>
> *Explore <u>Reuters's</u> peer support network.*

▶ *Mentoring programmes*: Assign a senior journalist to mentor less-experienced colleagues. Mentors should help mentees recognize online abuse, the topics that typically lead to it and the forms that it may take.

▶ A *chat group* on WhatsApp, Messenger or a similar programme can be used not only to report threats but also to provide support in case of attacks.

▶ *Regular conversations*: Editors should be encouraged to create opportunities to discuss the issue of online harassment in group settings. Examples can include:

- "Coffee talks" in which journalists from the newsroom or from other media outlets share their experience of coping with online harassment over coffee. These "experts-by-experience" can provide valuable insight and tips and further help "break the ice" when it comes to discussing online abuse openly.

- Knocking down the power of online harassment with humour. For example, the targets of attacks may want to consider putting the comments they receive on a wall. Reading them aloud with colleagues or laughing about them can have a cathartic effect. Newsrooms have reported that such measures can help relieve anxiety and tension and in some cases help put the attacks into perspective.

Self-care plan for journalists

Beyond the measures provided by newsrooms and other organizations, journalists should be encouraged to develop a self-care plan to minimize the risk of long-term trauma derived from being exposed to intense online harassment.

> **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE**: IPI's Newsrooms Ontheline website features a **video series** on coping mechanisms

d Temporary leave, relocation and/or reassignment

Based on an assessment of the emotional distress of the targeted journalist, a brief temporary leave can minimize potential trauma. Granting leave in such situations is a common practice in newsrooms, especially in departments frequently exposed to violent or highly stressful content such those working with user-generated content (UGC).

Finnish newspaper Turun Sanomat relocated one of its female journalists from the city of Turku (around 250,000 people) to the much larger capital city of Helsinki after a series of online threats were followed by direct threats in the street. In the large city, the chances she would be recognized were much less.

e Public statement of support

For the news organization, showing public support for a journalist under attack sends the message that the organization stands behind its staff and views attacks on its journalists as an attack on the institution as a whole. However, depending on the case, it might be better to keep a low profile so as to avoid placing the focus on the journalist and thereby potentially encouraging greater attacks. The following criteria should be used when considering whether or not to issue a public statement of support:

▶ Will it amplify the attack?

▶ Will it lead to further harassment?

▶ Will it harm any legal case that the news organization is considering filing?

f Moderating online abuse

A thorough, well-developed strategy to moderate user comments is necessary in order to ensure that attacks targeting journalists and news organizations are swiftly removed, alongside other unacceptable comments.

Preventing online abuse

▶ **Develop *Community Guidelines* or *Netiquette policies,*** which are key tools for both users and moderators. These participation guidelines will make clear that criticism is welcome but insults, attacks, hate and threats will not be tolerated.

> *Read the Guardian's community standards and participation guidelines.*
> *Read Deutsche Welle's netiquette policy.*

▶ **Build a community**: Though it takes a while to develop and maintain online communities, these are of utmost importance when it comes

to countering online harassment. Readers who feel part of a community are more likely to defend the media organization or the targeted journalist when smeared or threatened on social media platforms and the comments sections of the news outlets.

▶ **Set up a *registration scheme* on your media outlet**: It is good practice to ask users to register in order to be able to comment. This requirement is important not only in view of potential legal liabilities but also as an initial hurdle to dissuade aggressors and machine-operated accounts.

▶ **Allow comments on selected content**: If the resources available to moderate comments are limited, a good strategy is to open only some of your content to comments. In doing so, select a variety of subjects to ensure that your community has the possibility to express views on a range of different topics.

▶ **Block comments for certain times**: If you are concerned about not being able to moderate discussions overnight or during weekends or at any other time when moderators cannot dedicate sufficient time to the task, consider blocking the possibility to comment for the relevant period of time. If you do so, make sure your users are informed when they will be able to post comments again.

▶ **Limit the time for comments**: Another strategy to give users the possibility to share opinions but limit the burden on your team is to allow comments only for a limited time after the article is posted.

▶ **Set alarms to monitor users' activity:** Sometimes conversations that have been silent for a while suddenly become active again. If you don't want to close comments, use a notification system that brings this change to the attention of moderators.

Moderating and reacting to online abuse

Keep in mind that removing attacks, threats and insults targeting journalists does not remove the risk of physical violence emanating from the aggressor. Moderators who see aggressive messages aimed at a journalist, particularly those that contain a threat, should not only remove those messages but also bring them to the attention of relevant persons in

the news organization, including the target of such attacks.

On-site comments:

► *Removal of comments*: Comments that include a threat, insult or another attack against a journalist need to be analysed closely by moderators, who will have to determine if the comment in question falls within the boundaries of legitimate criticism or is in breach of the Community Guidelines and therefore needs to be removed. Any decision about removing a comment attacking a journalist should take into consideration not only the content of the attack but also the vulnerability of the journalist. It is good practice to inform users why their comments were removed and which articles of your Community Guidelines the comment breached.

► *Warning and blocking users*:

  ► *Warn users who repeatedly breach the Community Guidelines*: A good way of warning users who repeatedly breach Community Guidelines is to block their ability to post comments for a period of time. Whenever you take this step, make sure the users receive a message from you explaining why this decision was made.

  ► *Inform users when their accounts are deleted*: Deleting a user's access to comments for good is a serious step and the appropriate answer to serious aggressions. Users whose accounts are deleted should receive a message explaining what led to that decision.

► *Participation of moderators in user conversations*: Moderators should act under the media outlet's account and remind users of the principles included in the Community Guidelines. The participation of journalists in the conversation can raise the quality of the conversation but should not be imposed and the risks should be carefully considered.

On social media platforms:

Media organizations use social media platforms to reach a wider audience, generate public debate around certain issues and, ultimately, create a community. Media outlets tend to apply the same community standards on their official social media

channels as they do in their own discussion forums, where moderations teams engage with the audience and create an ecosystem for healthy public debate with and among users.

Managing online abuse on Facebook:

► *Delete a comment* when it contains aggressive or threatening content or derogatory words and insults. Criticism, no matter how harsh, should be permitted, however.

► *Hide a comment* with abusive content. Moderators generally consider this less effective than deleting as the user and the user's friends can still see content in question, even if others cannot.

► *Ban a user from the media outlet's Facebook page* when the user has repeatedly posted hateful or abusive comments, even after being warned. This is done to remove a user who is seen as persistently undermining the values of open discussion.

► *Remove a user from the page*, as a warning to deter further abusive comments. Less consequential than banning as the user can like or follow the page again.

► *Disable/turn off comments*, although this feature is only available on video posts. This is done when the moderation team does not have the resources to moderate the flow of comments on a video or live stream.

► *Block words* and set the strength of the profanity filter.

► *Report a post or a Page* that has breached both Facebook's and the media's own community standards.

Managing online abuse on Twitter:

► *Muting*: When it comes to online abuse in violation of both the media outlet's own and Twitter's community standards, moderators tend to mute rather than block accounts. This option dilutes the direct impact of the abuse but also prevents a possible angry backlash as the muted user has no knowledge of the muting. Finally, muting allows moderators to still see content produced by

muted accounts and therefore remain vigilant to any potential credible threats.

▶ *Blocking*: Moderators tend to block accounts that persistently spam or send scams, otherwise moderators generally adopt this measure as a very last resort to avoid a backlash from the blocked accounts as the latter are notified when they are blocked. Also, since the moderator will not be able to access the blocked account, it makes it difficult to monitor any imminent threat.

▶ *Reporting*: Moderators generally report tweets or accounts to Twitter that disseminate potentially credible and imminent threats or contain violent imagery.

▶ *Hide replies*: Moderators have the option to hide replies to their tweets. All users can still access the hidden replies through the hidden reply icon, which shows up on the original tweet when there are hidden replies. However, Twitter developed this option with the intention of minimizing the impact of trolling or insulting comments so they do not dominate the conversation. When a moderator hides a reply, the author of the reply will not be notified.

sures implemented, including whether new or different measures are necessary.

In addition to assessing the support measures themselves, newsrooms should also regularly re-evaluate the effectiveness of their overall response structures to harassment. This should include qualitative surveys to gauge the degree to which staff members and contributors feel the issue is being taken seriously as well as quantitative reviews of the number of cases in which some form of response is taken.

Step 4: Tracking and Reassessment

Newsrooms should keep an eye on reported cases of online harassment and reassess the safety and support mechanisms to protect journalists from online harassment.

News organizations **should create a database** to keep track of incidents of online harassment and responses that have been taken. This database does not need to include every single instance of harassment, but should encompass at least those instances that are reported by staff members through formal reporting mechanisms or where a risk assessment has prompted the implementation of support measures.

The primary purpose of this database is to follow up on reported instances of online harassment and allow for a regular (re)assessment of the support mea-

Roles and Tasks

This is a description of roles and tasks *that need to be taken into consideration. In smaller newsrooms, some of these roles can be performed by one single person.*

Online Safety Coordinator

This profile entails a series of tasks that can either be clearly spread among staff members or assigned to a specific person:

▶ Act as a figure to whom journalists can report incidents of online harassment.

▶ Assess in coordination with the targeted journalists, the editor and the head of audience each case of online harassment and suggest the support mechanisms that the targeted journalist requires.

▶ Where necessary, coordinate with management and legal experts any institutional response by the media outlet.

▶ Keep the database of cases of online abuse updated so as to follow and evaluate the efficiency of measures implemented.

▶ Due to the changing nature of online attacks, regularly review the measures that the newsroom has in place to prevent and respond to online harassment.

▶ Act as a coordination and educational point for these measures. The Online Safety Coordinator should be deeply familiar with all newsroom measures, be able to explain them to journalists facing online abuse and be the primary point person for implementation.

▶ Regularly attend editorial meetings to become aware of upcoming content that may trigger online abuse.

Management

▶ Acknowledge that online harassment is a serious concern and that an attack on one staff member is an attack on the entire media organization. Communicate this position regularly to the newsroom.

▶ Adopt structural changes in the newsroom to create a conducive environment in which reporting online abuse is not stigmatized. Ensure that sufficient resources – time and funding –

are allocated to maintain and update these new structures.

Appoint one or several Online Safety Coordinators, as described above.

▶ Include the targets of online attacks in decision-making processes that affect them.

Editors

▶ Acknowledge that online abuse is a serious and unacceptable issue and not simply a characteristic of modern journalism.

▶ Regularly include online harassment as a topic in editorial meetings. Speaking openly about the issue will create an atmosphere in which journalists will feel more comfortable reporting attacks.

Moderators

▶ Identify individual threats and orchestrated campaigns on social media platforms and comments section targeting staff members, record them in a database and escalate them to the journalist, editor and online safety expert.

▶ Contribute in the assessment of the level of threat of the online abuse.

▶ Take over a targeted journalist's social media accounts to reduce the latter's exposure to violent content and minimize potential trauma.

Journalists

▶ Understand that online abuse is a serious and unacceptable issue and not simply a characteristic of today's journalism.

▶ Participate in all relevant training opportunities offered by the media outlet, including awareness, digital security and trauma risk management training.

▶ Participate in both formal and informal peer support structures.

▶ Report issues of online abuse when they occur; even if you do not believe you will suffer any negative consequences from the abuse. Reporting it helps the newsroom to understand the scope of the issue and develop measures necessary to counter it.

About IPI

Founded in 1950, the International Press Institute (IPI) is a global network of editors, journalists and media executives who share a common dedication to quality, independent journalism. Together, we promote the conditions that allow journalism to fulfil its public function, the most important of which is the media's ability to operate free from interference and without fear of retaliation. Our mission is to defend media freedom and the free flow of news wherever they are threatened.

About IPI's Newsrooms Ontheline programme

The objective of IPI's Newsrooms Ontheline programme is to collect and share resources and best practices for media outlets and journalists to prevent, counter and address online harassment and abuse against them. In providing these tools to newsrooms, it aims to not only counter the negative personal and professional impact of online abuse on journalists but also help prevent self-censorship arising from online attacks that threatens the public's access to the news.

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