

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

#SOFJO

Safety of
Female
Journalists
Online



Online abuse: a threat to freedom of the media

When journalists are targets of online abuse, the attacks take a toll on freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Journalists are under surveillance and their work leaves them exposed to on- and offline attacks that affect the individual – and the media as such.

Online threats can – and do – lead to physical harm and death.

Women writers and journalists are particularly at risk.

Female journalists and media actors are singled out and fiercely attacked on social media via tweets, Facebook posts, in online comments on news platforms and through backchannel messaging platforms.

Studies have shown that articles written by women journalists attract more abuse and dismissive trolling on media websites than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about.

Misogynistic, racist and other character assassinations can and do create a chilling

effect that silences female journalists online and create a deterrent to freedom of expression.

Online threats can become severe, threatening the personal safety of women journalists with rape, assault, exile, and death.

For female journalists, online harassment may result in emotional and physical stress. Attacks erode the credibility and the reputation of journalists, limiting access to future job opportunities. Female journalists often fear for their safety and that of their family, and may start using pseudonyms when they publish, or stop writing about a topic entirely. They can experience public shaming, and a lack of attention to their privacy needs.



#SOFJO Side Event at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2018. Photo: OSCE.

“ On Twitter, female journalists receive nearly three times as much abuse as male journalists. ”

Demos, IAWRT.org handbook (2014)

#SOFJO: Safety of Female Journalists Online

In 2017, the Office of the OSCE Representative of Freedom of the Media (RfOM) re-launched the campaign to preserve the safety of female journalists online, building on the work previously carried out during the project, raising public awareness to online abuse. The outreach campaign helps defend free media and free expression on- and offline by providing an early warning of violations in the OSCE region.

Project goals:

- To provide tools and resources for journalists who have been targets of online abuse and create a network of support for female journalists in the OSCE region.
- To continue to raise awareness of the issue by sharing the experiences of women collected throughout the project.

Violence, including online harassment and intimidation, continues to plague journalists across the OSCE. Any effort to silence female journalists must be regarded as a direct attack on freedom of the media.



'A Dark Place', documentary produced by the OSCE RfOM, together with the International Press Institute as part of the #SOFJO campaign.

In 2018, the RfOM, together with the International Press Institute, launched the documentary 'A Dark Place', to highlight the experiences of female journalists who have been subjected to online harassment, in a bid to raise awareness and inspire change. Using this tool, the Office organizes screenings and panel discussions across the OSCE region. In February 2019, the conference *'Increasing Opportunities for Freedom of Expression and Media Plurality'* discussed policy developments and challenges, and identified effective counter measures.

During the event, the RfOM launched a communiqué on safeguarding marginalized voices online with concrete recommendations to governments, media outlets and Internet intermediaries.

The RfOM continues to support comprehensive research critical to respond to the needs of female journalists. The RfOM also continues to host expert meetings to provide a platform for idea exchange and collective strategies as well as workshops for journalists, academics and civil society on digital security, trauma and international advocacy strategies and to discuss needed interventions.

Taking action: What can we do?

In December 2018, the OSCE participating States recognized the specific threats faced by female journalists, when they adopted the landmark Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/18 on Safety of Journalists.

The Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists calls on States to

“condemn publicly and unequivocally attacks on women journalists in relation to their work, such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence.”

The key learnings from previous #SOFJO events point to the need for a comprehensive, proactive approach to normalize discussions of abuse within media organizations, and clear policies and procedures for providing peer and psychological support.

The events also provided data for the social media

outreach campaign #SOFJO, helped create a network of support across participating States, as well as consolidated research on online harassment as it relates to media freedom.

Online harassment is serious and has short and long-term effects. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, cautions: “We also need to understand that many of these actions, regardless of the actual physical danger, operate by creating a stressful, disruptive, and at times invalidating environment in which the journalist must be vigilant about self-presentation, privacy, danger, and security of self and loved ones. This psychological pressure, which at its most severe may challenge a journalist’s capacity to work effectively and safely, undermines human rights of autonomy, free expression, dignity and justice.”

Policymakers and civil society should consider support that helps individual journalists navigate online attacks.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Civil Society:

- Consider providing physical and online support to targets of online abuse.
- Develop better education and training of journalists, management and information technology specialists about workflow protections and data management.
- Examine how social media policies may affect private and offline time of journalists.
- Provide training to law enforcement to better investigate and prosecute online abuses.
- Work with technology partners to develop better reporting practices.
- Enforce existing legal frameworks and find new technological remedies to counter attacks by bots and smart mobs.

Resources & Recommendations

For media organizations and their management, online harassment and abuse must be approached with a co-ordinated effort involving human resources, information technologies, legal and newsroom

management. Risks for each journalist will differ, depending on the type and number of perpetrators, the location, speed and types of online attacks and the journalist's own activities.

Recommendations for Media Organizations:

- Respect the needs of individual journalists. Each journalist has her own level of privacy, risk and exposure.
- Designate a point person who is responsible for collecting reports of online harassment from journalists and engaging other parts of the media organization, such as legal, management and information technology teams.
- Provide training in supportive and empathetic response and trauma response and effects.
- Train journalists in where, when and how to report online abuses. Develop various protocols for handling social media accounts in the event of a co-ordinated attack.
- Discuss possible strategies with the target of the online abuse and determine how legal and IT teams and colleagues might help.
- Practice information security techniques throughout the news workflow.
- Learn how hardware, software, mobile technologies and other workplace platforms leave data and information exposed. Train staff on encryption solutions to workflow.
- Determine how social media will be used/required for your journalists. Do you have a social media policy? How flexible is it to accommodate different needs of different journalists?

Resources for Journalists:

Committee to Protect Journalists: cpj.org

International Women's Media Foundation: iwmf.org

A Culture of Safety Alliance for Freelance Journalists: acosalliance.org

TrollBusters: Online Pest Control: troll-busters.com

International News Safety Institute: newssafety.org

Google Idea's Project Shield: igsaw.google.com/challenges

HeartMob: iheartmob.org

CommunityRed: communityred.org

Dart Center: dartcenter.org

International Press Institute: ipi.media/programmes/ontheline

Recommendations for Individual Journalists:

- Consider withholding your byline. Use anonymity to your advantage to deflect online attacks.
- Practice safe digital hygiene by not downloading suspicious files, not clicking on phishing links or by not allowing access to location-based data from your mobile phone.
- Determine how much of your personal life will be exposed to online attack. Use separate social media accounts for professional and personal use.
- Report any online harassment to the media organization management. Use screen grabs to document what you see on the screen.
- Use online safety tools such as VPNs, passphrases, two-factor authentication and other encryption and communication tools like Signal and SecureDrop.



'Increasing Opportunities for Freedom of Expression and Media Plurality' Conference, February 2019. Photo: OSCE.

Learn More:

Find material, including the latest Communiqué on safeguarding marginalized voices online and the Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists on the RFoM website: osce.org/fom.

Follow the campaign on social media to keep up with the latest developments. [@SOFJO](https://twitter.com/osce_rfom) | [@osce_rfom](https://twitter.com/osce_rfom)

Follow the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media



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