

■ New Challenges  
to Freedom of Expression:

# Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media wishes to thank the Governments of Sweden and Lithuania for their support to this publication.

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

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Design & Layout by

Imprimerie Centrale S.A.  
Luxembourg



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# Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists



The Representative on  
Freedom of the Media








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## Foreword



## Dunja Mijatović, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Democracy thrives when a plurality of voices are heard online. Yet, one particular group of voices has come under attack in the most disturbing and dangerous of ways. Female journalists and bloggers throughout the globe are being inundated with threats of murder, rape, physical violence and graphic imagery via email, commenting sections and across all social media platforms.

Based on a number of cases I raised and information provided by journalists from throughout the OSCE region, I issued a Communiqué<sup>1</sup> in February 2015 to bring awareness of the issue to OSCE participating States, media companies and civil society and to bring attention to the growing threat of female journalists being coerced into silence online, with widespread repercussions including their opting out of reporting on certain issues, and even leaving social media and retreating into silence.

I next decided to take a closer look at the effect this could have on media freedom and free expression online and explore how stakeholders could effectively address this issue. My Office carried out a qualitative study<sup>2</sup> of female journalists working in the region. The responses we received were a true wake-up call and shocking in terms of number and nature of threats most of these women were subjected to on a daily basis. It is important to note that male journalists are also targeted with online abuse, however, the severity, in terms of both sheer amount and content of abuse, including blatant sexist and misogynistic vitriol, is much more extreme for female journalists.

The dimensions of the negative implications that this type of online harassment has on female journalists and on media freedom were explored during the expert meeting, “New Challenges to Freedom of Expression – Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists”<sup>3</sup> organized by my Office in Vienna on 17 September 2015. The meeting engaged stakeholders from media and the ICT industry, governments, academia, international organisations and civil society in an in-depth discussion about the challenges they face in dealing with such gendered online abuse, and the strategies and solutions that can be adopted to combat it.

I called on the OSCE participating States to declare, unequivocally, that any effort to silence women online must be regarded as a direct attack on our fundamental freedoms, while refraining from drafting new laws to restrict abusive speech on the internet, as they may have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

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1 <http://www.osce.org/fom/139306>.

2 <http://www.osce.org/fom/178796>.

3 <http://www.osce.org/fom/179486>.

Following the expert meeting, my Office released a number of specific recommendations on how to best ensure that existing legal frameworks be used to support female journalists and prevent online harassment. Along with a copy of these recommendations, in this publication you'll find a number of essays from prominent journalists, academics and organizations on their experiences dealing with online threats against female journalists. Though each perspective and experience is unique, the overall message is the same: this dangerous phenomenon limits the sharing and receiving of information and constitutes a serious obstacle to online plurality, thereby restricting the freedoms and rights of society as a whole.

I hope this publication will begin to clarify the complexity of online abuse of female journalists and will be used as guidance for action to counter the phenomenon and replace it with an Internet culture and environment in which everyone feels safe to share and receive information and opinions.

My many thanks go out to all the contributors – the staff at The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, Elana Newman, Susan Drevo, Bradley Brummel, Gavin Rees and Bruce Shapiro, Elisa Lees Munoz of the International Women's Media Foundation, Caroline Criado-Perez, Aina Landsverk Hagen, Alison Bethel McKenzie, Sejal Parmar, Snježana Milivojević, Courtney Radsch from the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Zorana Antonijevic and the OSCE Gender Section.

Finally, a special thanks to Becky Gardiner, the editor of this publication, for her diligence and expertise. Becky Gardiner worked as a senior editor at the Guardian from 1998 to 2014, most recently as Comment Editor. She is now a freelance journalist and senior lecturer in Journalism at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Without each and every one of you, this publication would not have been possible.



## Recommendations



## Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe The Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović

### Recommendations following the Expert Meeting

## New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists

Vienna, 17 September 2015

*Online media today allows for the fast flow of information and the public's active participation in sharing ideas, news and insight. An open, free and safe Internet is essential for public debate and free flow of information and therefore should be duly protected. At the same time, the digitalization of media has made journalists and other online voices more vulnerable to threats and intimidation of different shapes and forms.*

Journalists' safety is a precondition for free speech and free media. Dealing with and minimizing threats to journalists is an essential component of the OSCE participating States' commitment to the protection and safety of journalists.<sup>1</sup>

Female journalists, bloggers and other media actors are disproportionately experiencing gender-related threats, harassment and intimidation on the Internet which has a direct impact on their safety and future online activities.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has initiated several activities this year to raise awareness and discuss appropriate responses to the problem.<sup>2</sup> The Representative's Communiqué on the growing safety threat to female journalists online issued 8 February 2015 was a strong call to the participating States to take action. It offered preliminary recommendations as a starting point for further discussion.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 OSCE Commitments on Freedom of the Media, Freedom of Expression and Free Flow of Information, <http://www.osce.org/fom/99565>.
- 2 Prior activities include a survey among female journalists in the OSCE region, summary available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/178796>, and a real-time discussion online (Tweet-chat) involving numerous stakeholders, <http://bit.ly/1LTvsGE>.
- 3 Communiqué 2/2015 on the growing safety threat to female journalists online, available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/139186>.

Online abuse must be dealt with in the broader context of gender discrimination and violence against women<sup>4</sup> to ensure that the same rights that people have offline must be protected online.<sup>5</sup>

The expert meeting “New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists” was organized by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in an effort to further elaborate on what actions should be taken to respond to these threats. Some 80 journalists, media experts and government and civil society representatives from OSCE participating States gathered in Vienna to discuss the current situation and to bring together best practices, strategies and possible solutions.<sup>6</sup>

The following are recommendations by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, on how participating States, media organizations and intermediaries can assist in ensuring that female journalists and media actors can work without fear and exercise their human right to freedom of expression.

### **Participating States should:**

- Recognize that threats and other forms of online abuse of female journalists and media actors is a direct attack on freedom of expression and freedom of the media.
- Strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to understand international standards on human rights so they can identify real threats to safety and protect individuals in danger, including providing tools and training on technical and legal issues.
- Refrain from introducing new criminal laws that could stifle freedom of expression, opting instead to apply existing laws that are in line with international human rights standards.

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4 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, (MC.DEC/14/04), <http://www.osce.org/mc/23295?download=true>, Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women (MC.DEC/7/14), <http://www.osce.org/cio/130721?download=true> and Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168046031c>.

5 UN General Assembly Resolution 20/8 on The Promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/G12/153/25/PDF/G1215325.pdf?OpenElement>.

6 Attending non-governmental organizations included Index on Censorship, International Women’s Media Foundation, International News Safety Institute, European Federation of Journalists, Committee to Protect Journalists, International Press Institute, One World Platform, Reporters Without Borders, Dart Centre Europe, Ethical Journalism Network, Institute of Mass Information (Ukraine), Article 19, Russian Union of Journalists, Croatian Journalists Association, Lithuanian Online Media Association, Charter 97.

- Commission and support the collection and analysis of data related to online abuse and its effects, including creating a database of specific occurrences and follow-up from law enforcement.
- Establish a network of working groups with participating States, international organizations, media, civil society and Internet intermediaries to develop educational materials, awareness-raising campaigns and create effective structures for dialogue.

**Media organizations should:**

- Adopt industry-wide guidelines on identifying and monitoring online abuse.
- Ensure that journalists experiencing online abuse, both staff and freelancers, have access to a comprehensive system of support including psychosocial and legal assistance.
- Create a company culture of gender equality and non-tolerance to threats and harassment against staff.
- Put in place clear and transparent procedures related to content moderation, with the view of protecting the right to freedom of expression, and train relevant staff accordingly, while ensuring that male and female staff be equally involved.
- Work with other media organizations and associations to create support systems, including training and mentorship programmes, for female journalists and media actors.

**Intermediaries and social media platforms should:**

- Inform properly about terms of services, guidelines and best practices in ensuring a safe space for all users.
- Ensure that terms of service, community guidelines and information about their enforcement are proportionate and adequate, clear, understandable and easily available to all users.
- Provide information to users about best practices for online safety and about technical solutions on how to best report abusive content.
- Engage in capacity building with civil society organizations on issues like counter-speech as a response to abusive content.
- Collect data and statistics on online abuse to help facilitate more comprehensive research on online abuse of female journalists and media actors.

**1. The media cannot be truly free if women's voices are silenced**



## By Zorana Antonijevic, OSCE Gender Section

Thanks to advances in information technology, global communication networks now transcend national boundaries. They have a potential, for good and for bad, to change and influence not only public policies and public opinion, but also individual beliefs and behaviour. Personal choices and opportunities are both framed and threatened by a media that is digital, social and global.

The position of women in this setup is challenging. Despite the fact that more and more women make their careers in the communication sector, they are still under-represented and only a few have attained positions at the decision-making level or in areas that influence media policy. This reflects the status of women in other areas of public and private life: gender stereotyping is an obstacle to women's professional advancement in all sectors.

The media cannot be said to be truly free and representative without the equal voice of women. According to the International Women's Media Foundation Global Report<sup>1</sup>, nearly two-thirds of reporters are male, and this gender imbalance is even more pronounced at top management level, where 73 per cent of the positions are held by men, and 27 per cent by women. The report identified a glass ceiling for women in 20 of 59 nations studied. Most commonly, these invisible barriers were found in middle and senior management levels.

This male dominance is reflected in the editorial content. The Global Media Monitoring Project found out that women make up only 24 per cent of those heard about in the news, although they constitute half of the population. Also, men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender. This includes the sexual objectification of women that can normalise violence against women in its various forms. Taken as a whole, the fact that women are underrepresented communicates to the public that men are the cultural standard and women are not so important or capable.

As building blocks of democracy, the media are not just information providers – they are creators of public opinion as well. They are they gatekeepers of fundamental freedoms and also the agenda-setters. Therefore how they present themselves and what they communicate is of crucial importance, especially if these images and representations not only perpetuate inequalities between women and men in society, but also encourage violence against women.

Violence against women in all its forms is the most prevalent human rights violation in the world and unfortunately it is not decreasing, but growing. The media could

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1 <http://www.iwmf.org/our-research/global-report/>.

play a vital role in combatting all sorts of violence against women, but this would require their active engagement in their roles as educators, opinion-makers and information providers.

With the intimidation of journalists online, it seems that the violence experienced by many other women in the “real” world has simply moved into the cyberspace without changing its basic nature. The victims are disproportionately women journalists for whom a freedom to express their opinion about the world and politics represents an essence of their work and lives.

It is obvious: technology has brought many improvements into our everyday lives. Communication, work and travel have become easier, faster and, many would say, better. But the same technology has led to some women, especially those with public voices, living in fear. For some, threats of rape and sexual violence, hate speech and harassment invade every corner of their lives – threats which could at any moment be carried out offline. Abusive comments about how they look, write or think are ubiquitous. As one of the threatened journalists stated: “being female and having an opinion can be a dangerous combination online”.

Stereotypes and prejudices about what is and what is not appropriate for women to say, do, or wear did not appear online all of a sudden - all were apparent in mainstream media a long time ago. But the Internet has blurred the boundaries between private and public, professional and non-professional, entertainment and news. Consumers are becoming producers which affects the traditional media power structures with regard to content regulation: it is often not clear who should take responsibility for what is said and published online.

The crucial question is where to draw the line between freedom of expression and misogyny that encourages violence? The idea that technology would provide a shield from gender-based violence and discrimination now appears as a Utopian dream. The cyber world is not a safe haven. On the contrary, it is a dangerous and violent labyrinth for both men and women, and for female journalists in particular. The nature of their work, the vulnerability of their positions and fragile job security make them easy targets for those who do not comprehend that freedom and equality cannot survive if the half of the world population live and work in a fear and danger.

### **About the author:**

Zorana Antonijevic is Advisor at the OSCE Gender Section which gives support to all OSCE structures, field operations and participating States, helping to ensure that a gender perspective is integrated into all its activities.



**2. 'Women that talk too much need to get raped':  
What men are really saying when they abuse  
women online**

## By Caroline Criado-Perez

On the 25 July 2013, I got my first rape threat. That was a Thursday. By Sunday, police had collected 300 A4 pages of threats that had been made against me.

There were threats to mutilate my genitals, threats to slit my throat, to bomb my house, to pistol-whip me and burn me alive. I was told I would have poles shoved up my vagina, dicks shoved down my throat. I was told I would be begging to die, as a man would ejaculate in my eyeballs. And then they started posting an address linked to me around the Internet. I felt hunted. I felt terrified.

The immediate catalyst to this outpouring of hatred was the successful conclusion of a campaign I had been running for the previous three months. We had been asking the Bank of England to ensure the historical figures on English and Welsh banknotes were not all men. They had finally agreed. And this agreement was what had so enraged the men (and it was mainly men) of Twitter.

But when I looked at the content of the threats, it became clear that this was about much more than banknotes. “Go on your knees and suck my dick”, read one threat. “I will teach you to learn your place as a woman in this world. Then you will eat my cum”. Another told me, “SHUT YOUR WHORE MOUTH... OR I’LL SHUT IT FOR YOU AND CHOKE IT WITH MY DICK”. One tweet simply read, “WOMEN THAT TALK TOO MUCH NEED TO GET RAPED”. These are simply a few examples of thousands of threats I received that focused on my mouth, my throat, my speech. The message was simple and clear: these men very much wanted me to stop talking.

The focus on women’s speech is a running theme in the abuse received by women who speak in public. In 2014, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown was debating fellow British journalist, Rod Liddle on Channel 4 News. Watching the debate, the Conservative MP Michael Fabricant felt compelled to take to Twitter to say that if he ever had to debate Alibhai-Brown, he would “punch her in the throat”. Not the face, not the stomach, but the throat, where her vocal chords are.

Alibhai-Brown has not shut up, but other women have been silenced in the face of sustained attacks on their right to speak. In 2007, Kathy Sierra was a successful technology writer. For this crime, she was the subject of a storm of graphic rape and death threats. Her social security number and home address were published online. “I have cancelled all speaking engagements,” she wrote at the time. “I am afraid to leave my yard, I will never feel the same. I will never be the same.” She didn’t return online until 2013.

In 2015, Sue Perkins, a popular UK broadcaster and presenter similarly found herself facing a barrage of rape and death threats. She apparently deserved to be raped

and killed because of a rumour that she would be replacing the male presenter of *Top Gear*, a popular British TV show about driving and cars. She left Twitter and did not return for four months. Perkins will not have taken this decision lightly: maintaining an active presence on social media has become as integral to a job in the media as having access to email.

While Alibhai-Brown was engaged in political discussion, neither Sierra nor Perkins were doing anything that could be called “controversial”. They weren’t espousing feminist views – in fact, they weren’t making any kind of political argument at all. They were simply women with a public voice. More than this, they were women exercising (or rumoured to be about to begin exercising) their public voices in arenas – technology and cars – which have traditionally been considered to be male territory. The “Girls: Keep Out” sign on the tree house all grown up and with a nasty temper.

There is clearly much to be done to train the police and the justice system in dealing with the online abuse of female journalists. When I reported my abuse I was talking to police officers that didn’t understand how Twitter worked, and who didn’t understand how central it was to my job. They didn’t understand that switching off was simply not an option for me. Similarly, there is still work that can and should be done to make social media less of a toxic cesspit. The evidence suggests that if the first couple of comments under an article are constructive the rest of the thread tends to follow suit<sup>1</sup> – but if the first couple of comments are abusive, the rest of the thread continues in the same vein. This shows that creating a framework whereby positive and constructive contributions set the general tone are both possible and necessary.

But these tactics can only alleviate the symptoms, not the root cause of the abuse faced by female journalists. And that is a group of men who find women with a public voice such a terrifying prospect that they need to shut them up with the most graphic and detailed threats of violence. If we are to tackle this scourge we have to do two things. First, and most simply, we have to drastically increase the number of women who appear in the public sphere. In this way, women speaking in public would become commonplace, rather than scary and threatening. Second, and far more complex, we have to address how we are bringing up boys.

We live in a world where successful masculinity has been historically defined as dominance, leadership, and the occupation of the public arena. Until we change the meaning of masculinity so that it no longer hinges on being the dominant sex, we are never going to truly tackle this problem. And the rape threats will keep rolling in.

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1 Martin Belam’s blog, 24 January 2014: “How Facebook comments do/don’t increase/decrease\* trolling for news websites [\*delete as appropriate]”. The blog can be found at: [http://www.currybet.net/cbet\\_blog/2013/01/facebook-comments-trolling.php](http://www.currybet.net/cbet_blog/2013/01/facebook-comments-trolling.php) .

**About the author**

Caroline Criado-Perez is a British feminist activist and journalist. She launched a campaign for women to be depicted on banknotes. Her efforts led to a decision by the Bank of England to review the selection process for future banknotes; and in July 2013 the Bank announced that the image of Jane Austen will appear on the £10 note by 2017. Twitter announced plans to improve its complaint procedures as a result of the sustained campaign of harassment against her.

### **3. Shame, shock and speech injuries: Online harassment against journalists in Norway**



## By Aina Landsverk Hagen

Hate speech directed at journalists and activists in Norway is not a new phenomenon. Harassment that previously came directly to the individual, in handwritten letters or over the landline, is now made visible to all in commentary sections of online newspapers. Sexist and racist comments about individuals or groups are easily spread through social media. The upside is that, as one female journalist told me: “Finally everyone can see what we have known all along: misogyny is not a thing of the past”. What was previously considered a private problem is now being debated as an important social issue related to freedom of expression.

A recent research project<sup>1</sup> gave me the opportunity to meet reporters, editors and bloggers that have been engaged in public debate and have as a consequence experienced online harassment. Through an extended survey<sup>2</sup> sent to members of the Norwegian Union of Journalists and the Association of Norwegian Editors we gained knowledge of a phenomenon that is under-researched, both in Norway and internationally.

It hit me in the stomach when the interviewees told me their stories. One after another they described the fear, discomfort, anger and loneliness they felt: women like the experienced journalist who told me how rape threats became her own private problem when her boss made it clear that she couldn't help: “I was put off,” she said. “I could have had a completely different attitude to sharing my experiences today if I had not got such a cold shower at the time.”

This journalist never stopped writing, but in the interview she reflected on all the stories she could have told had it not been for the harassment she was facing at a regular basis. It was just too much to bear, she said.

Judith Butler's concept of “speech injuries”<sup>3</sup> is helpful here. When exposed to hate speech, the target suffers from shock and loss of context, Butler argues. They think, “*What happened just now?*” It is the unexpected nature of the harassing speech act that is so effective. Both professional journalists and bloggers told me that they experienced the hate speech as an invasion; they felt harassed and often they were not taken seriously. They feel forced into silence, secrecy, and sometimes even shame. This is, perhaps, the intention: Butler argues that hate speech seeks to ensnare its target in a moment of humiliation; to keep her there, stuck; to never let her go.

In the interviews, journalists and editors were asked about the first time they experienced being harassed. Some recalled clear death and rape threats; others de-

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- 1 The project resulted in the book *Meningers mot: Netthat og ytringsfrihet i Norge* (“The courage of opinions: Online hatred and freedom of speech in Norway”) (Hagen 2015).
  - 2 The survey was sent to 7,675 people, of which 1,314 replied (response rate of 17%).
  - 3 Butler, J. *Excitable speech. A politics of the performative*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

scribed milder forms of harassment aimed at their appearance, age or profession. But common to all these stories was that the description of the harassment as a *shock*. This interview is typical:

“The first time? I was totally unprepared. I had written an ordinary story from Senegal. When I got home and opened the email, it said: ‘So you have been to Africa and got yourself some negro cock now’.” She falls silent. “It’s 15 years ago and I didn’t have my guard up. The email was not close to me physically, like the envelope with pubic hair in it that I found in my mailbox a few years earlier. It was near in a different way.”

This journalist, like others we interviewed, experienced the virtual sexual harassment as “close up”, or even physical. When I asked her if she had told her editor about this, she fell silent again for several minutes, clearly emotional, before finally responding:

“If I was to show these messages to my editor... I don’t want to cry when at work. I am, after all, professional.”

How the journalists (male or female) react to online threats or harassment in the longer term was dependent on how others around them handled the situation. If they were ridiculed, ignored, or left to deal with the problem alone they were more deeply affected than if managers, editors or the organisation took some responsibility. How others respond seems to be a crucial factor for how subsequent episodes of harassment are experienced and handled, too, and whether the targeted journalist will tell anyone if it happens again – and again, and again.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of Norwegian newsrooms lack support systems or arenas where journalists can share their experience of harassment. This is despite the fact that harassment is affecting a large proportion of their staff. Almost half of the journalists in our study say they have experienced online harassment in the past five years – and there are no gendered differences here. One in four has received threats in the same period – more men than women. Male journalists are more likely to experience physical confrontation than women, while women receive more comments on their appearance and obscene phone calls. Approximately one in four women and one in 20 men have received sexualised comments or threats. Age plays a part too: almost twice as many young female journalists (aged 26-35) report that they have experienced harassment compared to their male colleagues of the same age; when we look at older journalists the results are reversed.

There are clear gender and age differences when we break down the numbers, and we should continue to do that in order to gain more knowledge on the causes and consequences of online harassment (see also Hagen and Drange, forthcoming 2015).<sup>4</sup>

4 Hagen, A.L. og Drange, I. (forthcoming 2015) “Ytringsskader, sårbarhet og sosial “skamming”: Journalister erfaringer med hatytringer i norsk offentlighet”, *Sosiologi i dag*.

Many describe the harassment they experience as dire and humiliating. Others say they have found ways to cope, and stay standing. As one editor says, "It is not objective. The feeling of discomfort is extremely subjective." As a matter of principle, she therefore reports all threats directed at her employees to the police if they themselves feel it's serious, regardless of her own perception of severity.

For many journalists it's an admission of failure to say that harassment has affected them. Journalists are not used to seeing themselves as victims; they see themselves as resilient and strong, and are aware of the power of their position. And yet one-fifth of Norwegian journalists and editors say they feel silenced because of harassments or threats.

Media organisations and colleagues must step up to the plate. Whether or not a targeted journalist has supportive colleagues and managers seems to be a crucial factor. Without them, she is more likely suffer from speech injuries; with them, she is more likely to continue voicing her opinion, and telling the stories the world needs to hear.

### **About the author**

Dr Aina Landsverk Hagen is a senior researcher at the Work Research Institute at the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. She is the author of *Meningers mot: Netthat og yringsfrihet i Norge* (2015).

#### **4. In Solidarity With 'The Pantyless Journalist': How Journalists In The Bahamas Stood Up To The Cyberbullies**

## By Alison Bethel McKenzie

Despite the significant amount of research I have done over the past year on the issue of the online harassment of female journalists, I was not prepared for the nastiness that followed a recent article written by Candia Dames, managing editor of the *Nassau Guardian* newspaper in The Bahamas. After all, three years ago, the Caribbean was voted the best place for women journalists to work.

In September 2015 Dames wrote an article about who had the support of their party to run for Prime Minister in the 2017 elections in the Bahamas. The response was fierce. Not only did men take to the Internet to condemn her, but what they had to say was foul:

“The lady left her undies as trophies with eight former members of Parliament, two former national chairmen, and one senator from each side, six cabinet ministers – four from the FNM side, and the collectors are planning to hold an exhibition,” wrote one man on Facebook under a post titled: “The Pantyless Journalist”. Some of the attacks came from high-ranking political party members.

What surprised me even more than the misogyny of the response, however, was that the journalistic fraternity responded immediately to the attacks against Dames. College journalism students created a social media campaign to stand behind the high-ranking female journalist. Several men and women, including members of human rights groups, wrote a joint letter and published it in the *Tribune* newspaper, the other daily paper on the island, condemning the online attacks: “The practice of invoking a woman’s private relationships and inferring that she is a ‘slut’ as artillery against her professional credibility is rooted in the purposeful manipulation of context in order to discredit and discriminate,” they wrote. “This malicious behaviour is made possible because of the misplaced belief that a woman’s sexuality is something to be ashamed of and the false perception that a woman should know her role and stay in her lane. It is also rooted in a double standard that affirms the sexuality of men, while demeaning the sexuality of women. The double standard is one of the greatest hypocracies of our age.” Only days later, one of the most popular radio hosts in The Bahamas lambasted those who took to Facebook, Twitter and the newspaper to slam Ms. Dames.

Attacks on journalists online is a violation of press freedom, and in the case of women, it is almost always also an act of violence.

While female journalists have long been plagued by sexual harassment in the workplace or while on assignment, the introduction of the Internet has placed them squarely in the line of fire. The attacks against them online are overwhelmingly sexual in nature.

Such online attacks are a form of character assassination intended to discredit the journalist's work, and can lead to self-censorship. The sexually-based attacks and threats may even cause female journalists to leave journalism altogether. Indeed, online attacks on women from certain countries can stigmatize them and their families, leading to ridicule, isolation, and the breaking up of marriages and partnerships.

The harassment of women journalists online has not been as well documented as offline attacks, although that is beginning to change. In a recent review of the research on the subject, John Wihbey and Leighton Walter Kille, of the Journalist's Resource Project<sup>1</sup> recently noted that: "As the totality and intensity of the harassment is being better understood, scholars have even begun to see this phenomenon as a profound civil rights issue for women and other groups such as racial minorities. Persistent threats cannot only diminish well-being and cause psychological trauma but can undercut career prospects and the ability to function effectively in the marketplace and participate in democracy."<sup>2</sup>

In her book *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, Danielle Keats Citron, affiliate scholar for the Center for Internet and Society at Stanford Law School and the Loisik, Macht Research Professor of Law, wrote, "Persistent online attacks disproportionately target women and frequently include detailed fantasies of rape as well as reputation-ruining lies and sexually explicit photographs." She also noted that "cyber gender harassment damages women as a group and society as a whole by entrenching gender hierarchy in cyberspace".

In some ways, online harassment is more dangerous because of its ability to spread across continents, and because once it's online, it stays online. A 2005 Pew Research Center report noted that often the female journalist's story or broadcast itself takes a back seat and the threats and harassment take the form of personal attacks, focusing on the woman's character, body parts or even going to far as to threaten sexual violence. According to the US-based Working to Halt Online Abuse, between 2000 and 2012, 72.5 per cent of harassing incidents were directed toward women. A 2014 study conducted by the think tank Demos showed that while men receive up to three times more harassment online than women, when it comes to Twitter, female journalists receive nearly three times as much abuse as male journalists.

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1 Based at Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, the Journalist's Resource project examines news topics through a research lens. - See more at: <http://journalistsresource.org/about#sthash.CGK4szXT.dpuf>.

2 John Wihbey and Leighton Walter Kille: *Internet harassment and online threats targeting women: Research review*, Journalist's Resource, July 13, 2015).

Carl Miller, research director for the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media and a co-author of the Demos study, which analyzed more than 2 million tweets sent to celebrities, politicians, musicians and journalists over a two-week period in 2014, told Journalism.co.uk: “We’re struggling with a new phenomenon here. We’ve opened up these new digital spaces and in lots of different ways people are not treating others civilly and as well as they would offline.”

So the question becomes: What do we, as defenders of press freedom, do about it?

The International Press Institute in Vienna and several other organizations, including the Organization for Safety and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the International Women’s Media Fund and the International News Safety Institute are continuing to bring attention to the issue and are offering support to women journalists who are victims of attacks.

The first step is recognizing that there is a problem and that the online harassment of female journalists constitutes an attack on the media. So it is a gender issue *and* a media issue.

As recommended by the OSCE, one important step is to better educate law enforcement agencies, training police officers to both make them aware of the seriousness of the issue to give them the tools to deal with cybercrime.

While some countries have laws regulating abusive language online, the vast majority does not. Only the United States and the United Kingdom have begun to address the issue. In the US, the Violence against Women Act (1994) now has added amendments to address new technology and to make tougher penalties for those who use new technology to abuse. Nationwide, 34 US states have cyberstalking laws.

Several NGOs and volunteer groups have sprung up in the last two years to try and address the issue of cyber bullying and cyber stalking in general. For example, Who@ is a volunteer organization founded in 1997 to fight online harassment through education of the general public, education of law enforcement personnel and empowerment of victims. Who@ has formulated voluntary policies for online communities to adopt “in order to create safe and welcoming environments for all Internet users.” Who@’s volunteers work with people currently experiencing online harassment, and help others to learn how to avoid such harassment or minimize its impact if it does occur.

The online community also needs to step up its game and report violent threats to police and reprimand, warn or kickoff repeat offenders.

As for the media itself, I support the OSCE recommendation that media companies “create a culture of gender equality and non-tolerance to threats and harassment

against staff” and that they “work with other media organizations and associations to create support systems, including training and mentorship programmes, for female journalists and media actors.”

And the incident with the *Nassau Guardian* managing editor? Her colleagues – both men and women – stepped up. They named and shamed. Bravo. As a media fraternity we all must work together to mitigate the online harassment of female journalists.

### **About the author**

Alison Bethel McKenzie is a journalist and former Washington Bureau Chief for The Detroit News and former Executive Director of the Vienna-based International Press Institute. A media trainer and consultant, she writes a weekly column for the South Florida Times, sits on the board of directors of AlJazeera America and serves as a senior executive for The Antillean Media Group.





**5. Beyond anecdotal reports:  
Some hard data about the online abuse  
of women journalists**

## By Elisa Lees Munoz

The International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) mission is to highlight the dangers journalists face in ensuring an open society, and to offer training and other programs to enable them to succeed. In the course of this work, we have witnessed a new and disturbing pattern of online harassment. The threats are often sexual and violent in nature with the objective to silence the journalist. And the trend we have witnessed is confirmed by our own empirical research.

In 2013, the IWMF conducted an online survey to document attacks against women journalists. The report, "Violence and Harassment Against Women in the News Media" provides the first comprehensive picture of the dangers faced by many women working in news media around the world. It describes the types of violence and threats female journalists encounter and considers how these incidents affect their ability to conduct their work.

Almost two-thirds of the 149 women journalists polled have experienced intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work. More than 25 percent of "verbal, written and/or physical intimidation including threats to family or friends" took place online. Digital harassment and threats directed at women differ than those experienced by men: they are misogynistic.

Nearly half (45%) of the journalists who experienced tapping, hacking and digital security threats said they "don't know" who the perpetrator was, while more than a quarter (27%) said it was a government official, 15% named police as the perpetrator and 12% selected "other," (in their comments, they mentioned activists, story subjects, lobbyists and competitors as perpetrators).

On the 469 reported incidents, 36% were received via either personal or work email accounts. Other channels where hacking was reported included personal mobiles (14%), social media accounts (12%), and work mobiles (11.9%/56).

Whether perpetrated by individuals or States, the targets of online harassment need recourse. As the author of an article about harassment of women journalist in the New York Times said, "the anonymity of the Internet and the advent of trolling is one of the most insidious forms of suppressing free speech online."<sup>1</sup> The IWMF believes the news media worldwide are not truly free and representative without the equal voice of women. The objective of gender based online harassment is to silence them.

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1 She Sounds Smart, but Look at Her Hair, The New York Times, Pamela Paul, March 27, 2015.

One of the first such cases brought to the attention of the IWMF was that of 2012 Courage in Journalism Award-winner Khadija Ismayilova from Azerbaijan. Ismayilova's case is now a well-known example of an attempt at public shaming, a form of online harassment often targeted at women. Cameras were hidden in her home, and intimate encounters with her boyfriend were filmed. Blackmailers warned her that the video would be posted online if she did not stop her reporting on corruption at the highest levels of government; when she refused to stop, the images were posted online. Ismayilova blamed the government for this smear campaign. In December 2014, she was arrested on charges of incitement to suicide – widely criticized by human rights organizations as bogus. In September 2015, she was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison for embezzlement and tax evasion. Her case is supported by many international human rights organisations.

Another case that has recently come to the attention of the IWMF is that of Amanda Smith, a freelance journalist who specializes in reporting on Kurdish issues in both the Turkey and Syria. The online harassment faced by Smith takes the form of trolling, defined as “making a deliberately offensive or provocative online posting with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response from them.”

In June of 2015 Amanda wrote about war crimes carried out by the Kurdish YPG militia. Her article included interviews with victims and was later documented in a report published by Amnesty International. As soon as it was published, her article received hundreds of comments, including ad homonym attacks, sexual threats and libelous accusations that she worked for the Turkish government – a particularly dangerous accusation in her line of work.

Amanda engaged with the campaign's ringleader, who went by the twitter handle @hevallo and has 35,000 followers. Amanda challenged the secrecy, arguing that as she operated openly, so should her critics. @hevallo agreed, he gave her his name and she found out that he is a UK citizen. Once confronted, he issued a retraction and the harassment ebbed, but only for a short time and it has not stopped @hevallo trolling other journalists reporting on Kurdish issues with whom he disagrees.

Yet another incident is that of Michelle Ferrier who is associate dean of innovation at the Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University. While working as a journalist, Ferrier faced an intense trolling attack that forced her to quit her job and move her family.

Ferrier has dedicated her career to combatting trolling. She participated in a IWMF-Ford Foundation sponsored *Cracking the Code* Hackathon in January 2015 to develop innovative apps tackling the obstacles women face in the digital news startup industry. She and her team won a \$10,000 the prize provided by Google

for their app Trollbusters; a service that addresses cyber-bullying and cyber-harassment for women journalists, publishers, and women thought leaders.

Ferrier found that law enforcement at the local level is not up to the task. According to her, “It is often not sophisticated enough do the forensics around these incidents. They do not know how the Internet or Twitter work nor how to identify IP addresses, or where they come from,” she explains. To support both local law enforcement and journalists, the Trollbuster mission is to counter hate with love by sending positive, affirming messaging for the target to the point of attack, providing a hedge of protection around the individual, and helping to provide emotional support and reputation management during cyber crises. TrollBuster documents incident reports which are archived for use in possible legal cases. Incidents may be reported by targets or witnesses to such attacks.

Trolling is a growing phenomenon. As Amanda Smith noted, it is difficult to know what to do when confronted daily with hundreds of threatening, sexualized, libelous messages that put their lives and their careers in danger. She tried to address the problem herself. First, she reasoned with him. “That was a big mistake,” she says. Ignoring them also does not help. The problem persists. As is the case with many journalists, she lives in a country where she is not a citizen and her country of citizenship is not the place where the attack is happening – in effect, the attack is not happening in any place, because it is only happening virtually.

While there is a lot of camaraderie and collaboration around the physical threats faced by journalists, as there should be, Amanda says, this is a very lonely place. Aside from the people who have experienced it, she says, no one sticks up for those targeted.

It is the IWMF’s point of view that more needs to be done. All journalists need to highlight and expose trolling, and robustly defend their colleagues who are victims. The IWMF is working with organizations and individual journalists to work to establish journalistic peer support networks similar. Trollbusters and organizations like them need support to work with journalists who are targets of online harassment. Law enforcement needs to catch up to the crime, and trolls and perpetrators of online harassment need to be exposed.

### **About the author:**

Elisa Lees Munoz is the Executive Director of the International Women’s Media Foundation.

**6. More platforms, less freedom:  
How new media reproduce old patriarchal structures**

## By Snježana Milivojević

What does a rape threat to a female journalist have to do with media freedom? How can posting a sexually offensive comment about a female blogger influence freedom of speech? Does sexual objectification in the media have anything to do with everyday sexism and misogyny?

These questions indicate connections between old patriarchal structures and future media practices.

The fifth Global Media Monitoring Project “Who Makes the News” (GMMP 2015) finds gender representation almost unchanged over the past 10 years and only slightly improved compared to 1995.<sup>1</sup> Women are subjects or sources in 24 % of news stories in legacy media (newspapers, radio and television) and only slightly more in Internet and Twitter news (26%). News focusing on women makes less than 10% of major news and only negligibly challenge stereotypes or discusses the gender gap.

More women are working in the news industry than ever before. On average 37% of the news is reported by women and 49% are presented or anchored by them. In some parts of the world it is much more, like across Southern or Eastern Europe (Spain, Serbia Romania and Bulgaria), where female reporters range between 50 and 80% and in some much less (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia where they are below 20%). But while female journalists are in the majority when it comes to reporting celebrity news, they are still in a minority when reporting politics, government, economy or crime. Women in news stories are more often asked to speak about what they have seen (popular opinion, personal experience or eye witnesses) than to give expertise (only 19%).

Women’s physical appearance still matters more than professional experience for many female journalists: data confirms that television is a workplace, which favours older men and younger women.

The media shapes female identities as being “unimportant and insecure”. Less visibility translates into the lower status that society attributes to people and events deemed not worthy of public attention. As feminist theories explain, the key to the objectification of women is to make them invisible, silent, passive and usable. This normalises many forms of discrimination and even violence against women.

The news industry is packed with sexist practices, glass ceilings and other forms of gender exclusion, which in turn reproduces the same reality. On digital media plat-

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1 Report available at: [file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Computer/Desktop/Gmmp\\_global\\_report\\_en.pdf](file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Computer/Desktop/Gmmp_global_report_en.pdf).

forms this gender injustice persists both in terms of representation and production. Media frames and practices structure and provide patriarchal continuity and there seems to be no digital “new world” out there in terms of gender relations.

The time when the Internet looked like a new, open space with universal and easy access to all is long gone. The architecture of the Internet duplicates the preexisting divisions of power and reinforces gender roles that are skewed to a particular type of both masculinity and power. This everyday, taken-for-granted sexism forms the horizon of inequality for many Internet users.

Increasing online sexual harassment of female journalists should be read against this background. The threats are visibly gendered. When addressed to women they are violently sexualized and with the main purpose to scare and silence them from being in public. If they are not shared or confronted, these threats remain a private problem not a public issue. Extensive research is crucial if we are to effectively bring this abuse into the open and demystify its “private” nature.

However, by targeting female journalists, online misogyny is not “just” a gender discrimination issue – it crosses over into the broader field of freedom of speech. Journalism is a public good in itself. It is an essential form of public knowledge in an information society. One distinct feature of the media industry and journalism in particular is its rising feminization. The GMMP 2015 results show that trend is general but unevenly distributed geographically, culturally and politically. Higher numbers of women among news makers may indicate a glass ceiling, with women being lower paid and in less prestigious roles. The geography of it may indicate that women are majority in the countries with “Mediterranean” type of media systems with low media autonomy, strong political parallelism and weak professionalism. Journalism there is a more politicized and partisan, but also a less prestigious profession. But in either case harassing, targeting or threatening women is not just threatening their freedom of speech but affects the quality of news production in general.

Things appear slightly different in the digital environment. When it comes to news production the Internet seems to be *gender blind*. There is less room for bylines in the economy of fast and short messages. But despite this apparent blindness female journalists still get three times more abusive comments on Twitter than their male colleagues. Online abuse or harassment across social media or Internet services is equally gendered when addressed to women.

Gendered harassment and online sexual abuse cause a very distinct form of chilling effect. In the age of “here comes everybody” many women choose to blog, tweet, write or speak hiding under a (male) pseudonym. Others keep isolated, remain silent or just leave the cyberspace. Thus the chilling effect of abuse may spread beyond the female journalistic community.



Some say ironically that there is no democracy in the space where cooking recipes mix with selfies, and that political speech and democracy needs a public space that is open and accessible but also meaningful and respectful of human dignity.

Digital threats to women journalists aims to do what misogyny has always done. They represent an attempt to prevent women from participating in public life. Society has for centuries been successful in keeping women out of public life by silencing, scaring and denigrating them, or by judging their appearance in public life to be trivial. Online threats keep this sexism alive.

The media charts territories of knowledge and experience and extend social and cultural structures into the digital world. It is up to media research to critically read this work, and to show how the online abuse of female journalists reveals that more media and more platforms can mean less freedom.

### **About the author**

Snježana Milivojević is professor of Public Opinion and Media Studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. She also chairs the Center for Media Research and is an Academic Board member at the Center for Women's Studies.

## **7. Laws, Norms and Block Bots: A Multifaceted Approach to Combatting Online Abuse**

## By Courtney C. Radsch

Journalists increasingly live their professional lives online. They depend on social media for reporting and disseminating the news, engaging with their audience, and building their profile. The suggestion that journalists facing online threats should simply stay off social media is impractical, and can even amplify the abuse.

So what can journalists do to combat online abuse? And in particular, what can female journalists do, given that we know that along with other women in public life, they suffer disproportionately from online abuse? “Online abuse and gender-based violence acts to impede women’s right to freedom of expression,” the Internet Governance Forum’s Best Practices Forum on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against women and Girls<sup>1</sup> found in a year-long collaborative study, “by creating environments in which they do not feel safe to express themselves.”

Those targeted find that their options are limited by the particular characteristics of the social media platform(s) as well as the legal infrastructure, or lack thereof, in the jurisdiction in which they find themselves. And there are other considerations too: journalists must grapple with decisions about whether to go public, seek redress or press charges, if the option exists, while weighing up the potential repercussions of any decision on their career.

“When I think about solutions, I think about it in a three-pronged approach,” Anita Sarkeesian, founder of Feminist Frequency, told *Wired* magazine: “a cultural shift, tech solutions, and then the legal aspect.” As she went on to explain, “There are already laws against this stuff. Sending someone a death threat is already illegal, so having it taken seriously is the third prong.” And it is serious – Sarkeesian was attacked and went into hiding during the Gamergate controversy.

### The law

Often people who seek to address online violence and threats advocate legal remedies, such as intermediary liability. However, designing new laws that do not have the potential to chill or restrain protected speech is extremely difficult, particularly in states with few democratic controls. Furthermore, the cross-jurisdictional challenges of enforcement mean state or national laws have limited applicability when the abusers may be located elsewhere.

In many cases laws against stalking, violent threats and harassment already exist and simply need to be interpreted for the online space. Measures can be taken to

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1 The third draft document of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2015 can be seen at: <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/best-practice-forums/539-draft-jp-bpf-women/file>.

help this happen. In Estonia, for example, there is a specialized court for online harassment, meaning that judges and law enforcement agencies have the expertise to deal with these issues, and civil courts can require removal of content. In South Africa, the Protection from Harassment Act 2013 includes special provisions requiring electronic communications platforms to assist with court orders to protect against harassment and imposes penalties for not providing that information.

But in many parts of the world, including countries that do already have special mechanisms to address online abuse, law enforcement agencies are not equipped to deal with these complaints, and can even perpetuate the harm by requiring that offending content be further circulated.

In the US, for example, individuals can file complaints with the Internet Crime Complaint Center. However, copyright remains one of the only legal avenues available to victims who seek to remove photos or videos circulating online as part of harassment campaigns. The use of copyright laws to try to get redress is burdensome and can prolong the harmful impact of online attacks by requiring victims to send copies of offending photos to the authorities, thus extending their circulation and the harm caused to women.

### **Social media platforms**

If the law too often fails those targeted, so too do social media companies. Reporting abuse often feels futile as requests for help go unanswered and unacknowledged. The platforms seem to be increasingly aware that they need to do more to empower users to combat abuse online, but there is still disagreement as to how they should play a more proactive role.

There are two distinct types of platforms, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) technologist Tom Lowenthal explained in an interview: those like Facebook, where each person is presented with a curated section of material based on preferences defined by the user, and those like Twitter and instant messenger, where information displayed is not informed by the platform or its algorithms. Therefore the approaches to combatting harassment and abuse online will vary depending on which type of platform is targeted.

Some platforms allow anonymity or pseudonymity, like Twitter, while others prohibit or make it more difficult, like Facebook. Improving transparency and increased user control is one way to think more specifically at how to develop more effective and nuanced solutions for combatting abuse.

Meanwhile, journalists themselves are coming up with creative technological solutions. Social media platforms allow users to block accounts they don't want to see. When the journalist Randi Harper was harassed for a blog post about sexual harass-

ment during Gamergate, she created a tool for Twitter that automated lists of accounts to block, so that all the offending Gamergate accounts would be prevented from showing up in the user's feed. This block list could be shared, so that others who want to keep out the offending accounts could easily do so.

Third party add-ons like Block Together do the same thing, but these features are not integrated or as easy to use as they could be.

"I definitely think social media and communication tools should make these sort of features more widely available," said Lowenthal. But he also warns of the potential danger of block lists: "If someone posts my home address, I'd want to know immediately."

### Speaking out and shifting norms

It is not only strangers who harass women journalists online, it also emanates from their male colleagues and sources. Kiran Nazish, a 33-year-old independent journalist, wrote an article about the threats that women journalists working in Pakistan face, including her own story of intimidation during an investigation. Following publication, she faced a barrage of social media hate. "There were hundreds of tweets calling me a traitor for defaming the country," she said in an interview<sup>2</sup>.

She chose to respond to some of her abusers, but only once or twice and then let it go. "The problem with trolls is there is no formula [for] dealing with them," she said. "Some people targeted choose to respond, some don't. I don't know if there's a right or wrong way."

Arzu Geybullayeva, an Azerbaijani journalist working in Turkey who received online attacks last year and has continued to receive periodic hate messages since, said she found that going public made it easier for her to deal with it on a personal and professional level.

"After I started documenting, sharing, and shaming these people it got easier," she said in an interview<sup>3</sup>. "I think this is the right way to go. To take screen shots, share and tweet about these people."

"Abuse doesn't come from monsters, but from regular people," Tetyana Lokot, a 34-year old citizen journalist and Global Voices editor based in Ukraine said in an interview, explaining how a Russian LGBT activist had used this name-and-shame approach to fight back against death threats she received on social media<sup>4</sup>.

2 Interview with the author, 15 November 2015.

3 Email interview with the author, 17 November 2015.

4 Global Voices report, April 20 2015: 'The Beauty of Russian Homophobia'.

An Australian journalist who covers gaming realized that many of the people posting threats on her Facebook page were kids. She tracked down their mothers' profiles and sent them screenshots of the concerning messages. One shocked mother forced her son to send Pearce a handwritten letter of apology.<sup>5</sup>

But getting women to speak out can be a challenge, whether because of professional power dynamics or because they live and work in conservative societies where their access to the public sphere is already challenged. Research by the International Women's Media Foundation showed how the journalistic profession is male dominated, with men holding most managerial and senior editor positions around the world<sup>6</sup>. Women may fear that they will not get the assignments they want if they report abuse.

Another remedy proposed by the Best Practices Forum this year was to require new users to a social media platform to do a short training program to learn about acceptable behaviour and how to report abuse<sup>7</sup>.

There are many good suggestions and initiatives, but ultimately solutions to combat and reduce violence against women online or off will need to be multifaceted. We must focus on shifting cultural norms so that such attacks become unacceptable and we do not resort to the legal system and its potential for unintended consequences on free speech. We have much work to do.

### **About the author:**

Dr Courtney C. Radsch is the Advocacy Director for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

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5 Aviva Rutkin, *ibid.*

6 IWMF Global report <http://www.iwmf.org/our-research/global-report/>.

7 IGF *Ibid.*



## **8. Protecting Female Journalists Online: An International Human Rights Perspective**



## By Sejal Parmar

The phenomenon of online attacks against female journalists and other communicators – such as writers, bloggers, activists and academics – poses an emerging challenge to human rights, particularly to the realisation of freedom of expression and gender equality. Consider the cases of the journalist Amberin Zaman, who reported on the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, or the American journalist Amanda Hess, who documented the issues of online abuse of women in her pioneering *Pacific Standard* piece “Why Women Aren’t Welcome on the Internet”.<sup>1</sup> These are not isolated stories, but rather snapshots of a clear global trend of online abuse faced by women raising their voices. Indeed, initial surveys of this phenomenon show that female journalists and television news presenters receive about three times as much abuse as their male counterparts, more than a quarter of instances of intimidation against female journalists takes place online and that female journalists covering technology are subjected to heightened levels of abuse.<sup>2</sup>

These attacks deserve to be taken as seriously as physical attacks against journalists and gender-based violence by relevant actors – states, intermediaries and social media companies, media organisations and also intergovernmental organisations. After all, these attacks have severe effects, including in terms of their psychological impact upon the female journalists who are targeted and also in terms of their silencing or “chilling effects” on their fellow female journalists and other women wishing to express themselves online. At the intergovernmental level, these impacts have begun to be recognised through the pioneering activities of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović,<sup>3</sup> and also UNESCO’s “gender perspective on safety issues”.<sup>4</sup> So far, however, the subject of gendered online attacks on female journalists and other communicators has attracted little

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- 1 See Amanda Hess, “Why Women Aren’t Welcome on the Internet”, *Pacific Standard*, 6 January 2014. See also Catherine Buni and Soraya Chemaly, “The Unsafe Net: How Social Media Turned Against Women,” *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2014.
  - 2 See Table of Results in Demos, *Vox Digitas*, 24 August 2014 <http://www.demos.co.uk/press-release/demos-male-celebrities-receive-more-abuse-on-twitter-than-women-2/>; International News Safety Institute and International Women’s Media Foundation, *Violence and Harassment Against Women in the News Media: A Global Picture*, 10 March 2014 <http://www.iwmf.org/our-research/journalist-safety/violence-and-harassment-against-women-in-the-news-media-a-global-picture/>; Catherine Adams, “Female technology journalists report abuse is still the name of the game”, *The Guardian*, 11 October 2015.
  - 3 OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Communiqué 02/2015 on the growing safety threat to female journalists online, 5 February 2015; OSCE, “Summary of questionnaire on safety of female journalists online” 26 August 2015; OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Recommendations following the Expert Meeting “New Challenges to Freedom of Expression Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists”, 17 September 2015.
  - 4 Jennifer R Henriksen, Michelle Betz and Joanne M. Lisosky, *Building Digital Safety for Journalists* (Paris: UNESCO, 2015) p 43 – 49.

direct, explicit and focussed attention from influential actors. States have begun to variously recognise “technology related violence against women” through their domestic laws and policies,<sup>5</sup> social media companies have updated their approaches on tackling misogynistic threats<sup>6</sup> and certain civil society organisations have gathered to discuss appropriate responses to online abuse against women generally.<sup>7</sup> From a human rights perspective, while UN human rights bodies have addressed the subject of the physical safety of journalists with a heightened sense of urgency since 2012, they have also not explicitly addressed the issue of online attacks against female journalists to date.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding the apparent paucity of direct attention from international human rights authorities, international human rights law should nonetheless provide a starting point and lodestar for developing responses to the specific challenge of online abuse of female journalists. This is because, as Philip Alston notes, international human rights law provides “a context and a framework, invokes states’ legal obligations, underscores that certain values are non-negotiable, brings a degree of normative certainty, and makes use of the agreed interpretations of rights that

5 On recent legislative developments in South Africa, Nova Scotia, California and New Zealand aimed at providing redress for “technology-related violence against women”, see Association for Progressive Communications, “End violence: Women’s rights and safety online, Technology-related violence against women: Recent legislative trends”, May 2014.

6 See Facebook’s Community Standards <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/> and Twitter’s policy on online abuse <https://support.twitter.com/articles/15794#>.

7 See Association for Progressive Communications, Due Diligence Project and Robert F Kennedy Human Rights Europe held an Expert Group Meeting on “Due Diligence and Accountability for Online Violence Against Women” on 15 – 16 October 2015 in Florence, Italy; and Panel on “Gender and the Internet” at Internet Governance Forum, João Pessoa, Brazil, 9 November 2015.

8 For an overview of international and regional human rights law on the protection of journalists, see Sejal Parmar, “The International Human Rights Protection of Journalists” in Onur Andreotti (ed), *Journalism At Risk: Threats, Challenges and Perspectives* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015). See Security Council resolutions 2222 (2015) of 27 May 2015, S/RES/2222 (2015) and 1738 (2006) of 23 December 2006, S/RES/1738 (2006). See also Human Rights Council resolutions 21/12 of 27 September 2012, A/HRC/RES/21/12; 24/116 of 26 September 2013, A/HRC/DEC/24/116 (decision); 27/5 of 25 September 2014, A/HRC/RES/27/5. See also the following General Assembly resolutions: 68/163 of 18 December 2013 (declaring 2 November the “International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists”), A/RES/68/163; 69/185 of 18 December 2014, A/RES/69/185. See also Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, 4 June 2012, A/HRC/20/17 and Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns, 10 April 2012, A/HRC/20/22. See also the UN Plan of Action, UNESCO, International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), UN Plan of Action on the Issue of the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, April 2012, CI-12/CONF.202/6. See finally, Joint Declaration on Crimes against Freedom of Expression of the four international mechanisms for promoting freedom of expression, June 2012.

have emerged from decades of reflection, discussion and adjudication”.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, “rights language recognizes the dignity and agency of all individuals and is intentionally empowering”.<sup>10</sup> As multi-stakeholder discussions on the development of approaches and policies to counter online abuse against female journalists proceed, the fundamental principles of international human rights law, particularly on freedom of expression, should not be forgotten.<sup>11</sup> This body of relevant international human rights law includes international treaty law, specifically Article 19 of the ICCPR.<sup>12</sup> But it also encompasses the “soft law” or non-binding instruments developed by UN human rights bodies – notably the authoritative interpretation of the Human Rights Committee, the resolutions of the Human Rights Council and the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression – that purport to interpret treaty law or advance the understanding of freedom of expression with respect to particular issues.<sup>13</sup> Although these bodies or courts have not hitherto directly and expressly addressed the issue of online attacks against female journalists, international human rights perspectives, particularly on the issue of physical safety of journalists, is valuable for the construction of approaches to online attacks on female journalists.<sup>14</sup> The remainder of this piece will indicate how these perspectives are valuable.

First, state authorities and other relevant actors – media organisations, social media companies and civil society – need to publicly recognise the additional risks faced by female journalists in carrying out their work and adopt a gender-sensitive approach in the development to approaches to promote online safety of journalists. Second, notwithstanding the important role of social media companies in this area,

9 Philip Alston, “The Two Words That Scare The Bank”, *Washington Post*, 7 November 2014. Though this article deals with the World Bank’s refusal to expressly engage in human rights, the quote on the importance of rights language is relevant for this article.

10 Ibid.

11 Relevant international human rights law on gender equality, particularly under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women or the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, is not considered in this article.

12 Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states: “1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. 2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice. 3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.”

13 For the authoritative interpretation of this provision, see Human Rights Committee, General Comment No 34, CCPR/C/GC/34, 12 September 2011.

14 For overview of international law on the protection of journalists, see Sejal Parmar, “The International Human Rights Protection of Journalists” in Onur Andreotti (ed), *Journalism At Risk: Threats, Challenges and Perspectives* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2015).

there still needs to be an overriding focus on the role of states, who owe a series of positive legal obligations to ensure the effective protection of female journalists from online threats by other individuals. Third and relatedly, the typology of state duties applicable in relation to physical attacks on journalists may be extended to the sphere of online attacks against female journalists. This typology encompasses the duty to investigate, prosecute and punish such gendered online attacks, the duty to protect female journalists at risk from such attacks, and the duty to prevent attacks from taking place at all. States are obliged to conduct independent, impartial, speedy and effective investigations into such online attacks, to prosecute those responsible and ensure that the female journalists subjected to such attacks have access to appropriate remedies.

In this regard, states need to ensure that there is an appropriate criminal justice framework, including legal provisions and the law enforcement machinery backed up by sufficient resources to address such attacks. Police investigators should be given adequate training and prosecutors should be given guidance on the application of existing criminal legislation to tackle gendered online abuse.<sup>15</sup> Given the impossibility of prosecuting every single type of abusive statement and in recognition of the range in severity of abusive statements, such guidance should emphasise that threats to life or physical integrity, including rape threats, should be prioritised for prosecution.

Beyond these duties, states should take preventive operational measures to protect those female journalists who may be at risk from such attacks. This means that states should ensure a comprehensive prevention strategy or public policy framework for prevention of online attacks against female journalists. In doing so, they should foster a climate that prevents such online attacks from taking place in the first place. This could be done through a range of measures, including appropriate education and training of state officials, especially those involved in law enforcement duties, clear public condemnations of such gendered attacks by public figures and innovative initiatives to actively promote women's freedom of expression online. But the particular nature of gendered online attacks requires states to also address the structural gender discrimination and wider societal misogyny that underpins and fuels them, a daunting but necessary task.

Fourth and finally, international human rights law also directs us to the *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*, a set of non-binding principles concerning the responsibilities of corporate actors, including intermediaries and social me-

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15 In the UK the Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer QC, published guidance for prosecutors on the approach they should adopt in cases concerning social media. See Crown Prosecution Services, "Guidelines on prosecuting cases involving communications sent via social media", 20 June 2013.

dia companies, to respect human rights.<sup>16</sup> These principles call on corporations to undertake human rights “due diligence”, which means that they should “[assess] actual and potential human rights impacts, [integrate and act] upon the findings, [track] responses, and [communicate] how impacts are addressed.” These principles provide companies like Twitter and Facebook with a human rights framework for formulating their responses in relation to incidents of attacks on female journalists. These principles should also prompt a critical reflection on the structural biases of relevant Internet companies. As Martha Lane recalled recently, “Twitter has said that if it had more women on their original design team it would have thought a bit more about the potential for trolling and abuse”.<sup>17</sup>

### About the author

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16 Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, John Ruggie, Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework, 21 March 2011, A/HRC/17/31.

17 Chris Johnston, “Martha Lane Fox calls for new body granting ‘deeper understanding’ of the Internet”, 24 March 2015.

**9. Online abuse of women journalists:  
Towards an Evidence-based Approach to Prevention  
and Intervention**

## **By Elana Newman, Susan Drevo, Bradley Brummel, Gavin Rees and Bruce Shapiro at The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma**

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, seeks to equip media workers worldwide with the tools and support they need to produce high-quality and responsible coverage of violence, conflict and tragedy. The Dart Center believes that innovative, informed and ethical reporting of violence is essential for the wellbeing of the individuals and societies that journalism serves.

When covering violence, conflict, and tragedy, journalists are exposed to many psychological and physical threats such as bearing witness to grief, loss, and cruelty, seeing bloodshed, or direct physical threats. At times, this crucial work can demand great courage. While the news industry has increasingly recognized its duty of care to provide hostile environment training and mechanisms for supporting those who work in dangerous situations typically far from home, less attention has been focused on safety concerns closer to home. Addressing sexual violence directed towards journalists, both from within and outside the industry, is an important part of the industry responsibility to its employees. Threats of all forms of violence can be used to suppress free speech or create environments in which journalists self-censure thus reducing freedom of the press. Gendered and sexualized violence in the workplace context, whether threatened or enacted, have been clearly shown to have serious maladaptive physical health, mental health, and occupational consequences in other industries (Chan et al., 2008; Collingsworth et al., 2009; Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). Given this clear evidence, we are concerned that adverse reactions to trauma can all lead to the abandonment of important lines of journalistic inquiry and impair journalists' ability to report effectively on such critical issues as human rights abuses, crime, and the public response to natural and man-made disasters.

The OSCE Representative of Freedom of the Media recently released recommendations on how participating states, media organizations, and intermediaries can ensure that female journalists work without being intimidated. We applaud and agree with all these recommendations. In this commentary, we focus on the recommendation for future comprehensive research about the psychological and physical abuse, intimidation, and harassment of journalists. We believe that in order to continue to develop sound evidence-based prevention, intervention, and prosecution responses to both online and offline threats to women journalists, the varying aims and effects of different types of aggressive acts aimed at journalists needs to be specified. We call for more precise terminology and research on the full spectrum of journalist mistreatment for all journalists to facilitate the ability of media organizations, civil society and government agencies, and intermediaries to prepare and respond effectively.

## Different motives for targeting female media actors (particularly online) require different prevention and intervention strategies.

- In some cases, online abuse of journalists may be a *form of general intimidation* aimed to stop a particular journalist from pursuing a particular story; an attempt to discontinue a particular journalist from covering an entire beat; a means of discouraging a media organization from pursuing a story or set of stories; an attempt to dissuade any journalist and news organizations from sharing information about certain situations; and/or a way to discredit, humiliate, or disrupt a particular journalist in retaliation for past reporting. Such online intimidation of female journalists may strike a sexualized or gendered tone, but the aims are typically strategic self-interest and/or political.
- In other cases, online threats of journalists may represent antisocial or interpersonal offensive acts by an individual with no strategic aims other than psychologically or physically hurting someone who happens to be a journalist. Some offenses may be explicitly sexualized or gender-based forms of aggression. Some may represent cyber-bullying.
- Other threats may represent a *form of workplace aggression* committed by a co-worker or boss. These events may take the *form of explicit gender discrimination or sexual harassment*. The aim here is to create a hostile work environment for women through demeaning gendered language or unwanted sexual attention. Sexual harassment is typically defined as consisting of three forms of behaviour: (1) behaviours that convey hostile attitudes towards an individual due to the person's gender, (2) unwanted sexual attention that are unwelcome or offensive verbal or non-verbal behaviours, and (3) sexual coercion in the form of bribes or threats related to an individual's employment status (Gefland, Fitzgerald & Drasgow, 1995).

Given that all of these types of threats may incur different degrees of danger, accurate predictive measures that can help us discern the level of imminent and distal threat are needed. We also need to understand that many of these actions, regardless of 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.



### **Understanding the type of threat and our ability to compare studies within and between professions requires precise and standardized terminology.**

Given the many forms and levels of threat, precise terminology in future research endeavors can assist us all. Precise terminology helps distinguish: (1) political actions deemed to curtail open discussion; (2) opportunistic threats by criminals; and (3) misogynist behaviours that are human rights violations. Use of consistent and precise definitions also allows better comparisons of results across journalism specific studies (e.g., Barton and Storm, 2014 <http://www.iwmf.org/intimidation-threats-and-abuse/>; Flatow, 1994). Likewise, establishing a standard language for these types of threats would provide a stronger research base in which the occupational safety of journalists could be compared to other professionals, and in which we could identify and appropriately apply successful interventions from other industries. In addition, it would be beneficial to clarify whether these threats are directed to journalists or their loved ones. This will be an important consideration since assuring the safety and psychological wellbeing of family members may need to become part of the response.

### **Gendered vs. non-gendered mistreatment may require different prevention and intervention strategies.**

In our current international study of journalists (<http://bit.ly/RERCq5>) at the University of Tulsa, one of our aims is to distinguish the impact of direct sexual harassment, vicarious traumatization, and intimidation on work and psychological outcomes. Based on our preliminary work assessing offline rather than online intimidation and harassment, we learned that while offline sexual harassment of journalists is gendered, offline intimidation is not. Intimidation of journalists was experienced roughly equally among female (79%) and male (78%) journalists ( $n=213$ ). However sexual harassment ( $n=333$ ) was experienced more often by females (66%) than males (42%). Thus, offline sexual harassment prevention and intervention efforts likely should include gender-specific strategies whereas intimidation prevention and intervention efforts likely can be effective using gender-neutral strategies.

### **Inside vs. outside industry perpetrators require different prevention and intervention strategies.**

Strikingly, our results reveal that sexual harassment perpetrators were more likely to be within industry actors (editors, colleagues, managers, crew members) than outside industry actors. More research is required to determine perpetrators of intimidation. Policy and interventions to address harassment and intimidation caused by inside and outside industry actors require different approaches. Human Resource departments have developed procedures and practices for dealing with sexual harassment perpetrated by employees. However, when harassment is per-

petrated by an organizational outsider, there are not often many options that the organization can pursue outside of handing the case to law enforcement or removing the person's access to the journalist. For example a person's subscription could be revoked or their connection on social media could be blocked. The human resource department's focus would be more about helping the victim than dealing with perpetrator in these cases.

**Distinguishing online intimidation and harassment that occurs in the field from online sexual harassment that occurs in the workplace is required to implement effective solutions.**

Given what we know about journalists' experiences of offline harassment and intimidation, an important first step is to distinguish such online threats from the online sexual harassment that occurs in the journalist's workplace. Because of the fundamental differences in the power of the organization to act and the types of actions that could be taken, we feel that it is important to distinguish sexual harassment that occurs within an organization from gendered or sexualized intimidation behaviours that come from outside the organization. Using different terms for these behaviours is a useful step in this direction. We suspect many online threats to female journalists online are mislabeled as sexual harassment when indeed they are sexualized occupational intimidation. If online threats of female journalists are labeled as occupational intimidation rather than sexual harassment, then the solutions are not solely in media companies' human resources policy and approaches. Our preliminary results from offline studies suggest that training and intervention targets within industry may need to focus more on gendered violence while intimidation training and intervention targets need to focus more on generalized awareness raising campaigns, legal, and technological solutions. Given the sexualized and gendered nature of online intimidation, we suspect that online intimidation will need an additional focus on gendered and sexualized violence.

**Cultural and systemic shifts are needed to address barriers to reporting harassment to authorities and/or employer.**

In our study, we discovered that few journalists (33 out of 132) who experience sexual harassment report it to their employers or other authorities. Common reasons for not reporting included "not important enough, did not think anything would be done, felt uncomfortable, thought I would be labeled as a trouble maker, too much time and effort, worried about confidentiality, and fear of retaliation from perpetrator." These results suggest a need for a cultural shift and confidential, efficient systems that address these personal and organizational barriers. These results suggest that the barriers and obstacles for implementation of the OSCE strategies need to be identified and addressed.

## **Reducing stigma and increasing peer support may help with trauma-related distress and occupational impairment caused by intimidation and sexual harassment.**

Finally, our preliminary analyses suggest that intimidation and sexual harassment are stronger predictors of trauma-related distress and occupational impairment (e.g., felt exhausted at work, missed deadlines, felt disconnected from colleagues or supervisors) than is assignment-related stress. These threats are workplace hazards which require governmental and industry responses. Understanding trauma-related reactions, creating mechanisms to prevent harassment and intimidation, and mitigating the harm of these attacks are all warranted. We hypothesize that methods to reduce stigma for getting psychosocial evidence-based help with these reactions, and creating and activating peer support will need to be part of the solution.

The OSCE has taken a vital step in protecting freedom of the press and the psychological and physical safety of female journalists. We believe that in order to prevent, intervene, and prosecute online abuse of female journalists, the greater context of gender discrimination, journalist intimidation, workplace aggression and online aggressive behaviours can help develop more nuanced policies.

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