

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

#SOFJO

Safety of
Female
Journalists
Online



Online abuse: a threat to freedom of the media

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

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

Women writers and journalists are particularly at risk. Female journalists and bloggers are singled out and

fiercely attacked on social media via tweets, Facebook posts, in online comments on news platforms and through backchannel messaging platforms.

In 2016, The Guardian conducted an analysis of readers' comments posted on its own website and found that articles written by women journalists attracted more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about.

Misogynistic, racist and other character assassinations can and do create a chilling effect that silences female

journalists online and creates a deterrent to freedom of expression. Online threats can become severe, threatening the personal safety of women journalists with rape, assault, exile, and death.

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

Protect plurality.

Protect female journalists online.

It's our responsibility.



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

Demos, IAWRT.org
handbook (2014)

#SOFJO: Safety of Female Journalists Online

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



A scene from a #SOFJO campaign video showing real tweets received by a female journalist as she goes about her day.

Project goals:

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

Violence, including murder, assault, intimidation and

harassment, including online harassment, continues to plague journalists across OSCE participating States. Any effort to silence female journalists must be regarded as a direct attack on freedom of the media. The Office protects journalists in cases of harassment, especially online harassment and threats of violence against female journalists and bloggers, against incarceration and physical attack.

Through targeted research completed in 2015, the OSCE identified the need for comprehensive research and consolidated data as critical

for OSCE participating States, media companies and internet intermediaries to respond to the needs of female journalists. In February 2015, the OSCE Representative for Freedom of the Media carried out a survey of female journalists. In September 2015, the Office hosted some 80 experts from media, internet intermediaries, and civil society to provide a platform for idea exchange and collective strategies. In 2017, the Office hosted workshops for journalists, academics and members of civil society on digital security, trauma and international advocacy strategies and to discuss needed interventions.

Taking action: What can we do?

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

“Acknowledge the gravity of the problem and put it on the agenda now. In cases of journalists being threatened and intimidated, a strong public condemnation by political and public figures is required in order for the public to recognize that this behaviour is not accepted and will not be tolerated.”

OSCE RFoM Communiqué
02/2015 on the growing safety
threat to female journalists online

The events also provided data for the social media outreach campaign #SOFJO, that was launched in the fall of 2017. As part of its 2018 activities, the Office will

create a network of support across participating States, including a hub of resources for women journalists, as well as consolidated research on online harassment as it relates to media freedom and freedom of the media.

Online harassment is serious and has short- and long-term effects. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, cautions: “We also need to understand that the many of these actions, regardless of the actual physical danger, operate by creating a stressful, disruptive, and at times invalidating environment in which the journalist must be vigilant about self-presentation, privacy, danger, and security of self and loved ones. This psychological pressure, which at its most severe may challenge a journalist’s capacity to work effectively and safely, undermines human rights of autonomy, free expression, dignity and justice.” (Dart Center, 2014).

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

Recommendations for Policymakers and Civil Society:

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

Resources & Recommendations

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

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

Recommendations for Media Organizations:

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

Resources for Journalists:

Committee to Protect Journalists: cpj.org

International Women's Media Foundation: iwmf.org

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

TrollBusters: Online Pest Control: troll-busters.com

International News Safety Institute: newssafety.org

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

HeartMob: iheartmob.org

CommunityRed: communityred.org

Dart Center: dartcenter.org

International Press Institute: ipi.media/programmes/ontheonline

Recommendations for Individual Journalists:

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



Manon Muti of Justice & Peace trains journalists at a #SOFJO workshop on digital security. Photo: OSCE/Javier Luque Martinez

Learn More:

Find reports, including the latest Communiqué on the growing safety threat to female journalists online on the RFoM website: [osce.org/fom](https://www.osce.org/fom).

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

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