

Women Journalists and Online Harassment

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SUMMARY

Women journalists face the threat of online harassment as they do their jobs of trying to engage with their audience over social media. This harassment can be different from what male journalists face because it can target women based on their gender or sexuality.¹ This harassment— vitriolic sexist attacks or inappropriately sexual barbs – mirrors the experiences of many women in general online.² This project sought to understand how professional journalists at print, broadcast, and web-only publications deal with this harassment and what influence it has on their ability to do their jobs, which increasingly require engagement with the public.³

To do this, we interviewed 75 female professional journalists who work or who have worked for news organizations in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We interviewed women from various cultures to more fully understand how harassment influences how women journalists do their jobs. Our sample included journalists who were new to the profession, as well as those who had spent many years on the job. We analyzed these interviews to look for common experiences, as well as differences, across our sample. The journalists are not identified by name or news organization to encourage their candor.

The main questions we sought to answer were:

- To what extent – if any – does online harassment influence how women journalists do their jobs?
- What strategies do women journalists use to prevent this harassment or deal with it once it has occurred?

The following results from our interviews stand out:

- Most of the female journalists we interviewed had experienced negative audience feedback that went beyond mere critiques of their work and, instead, often took the form of harassment, targeting them personally with a focus on their gender or sexuality.
- Women journalists we interviewed in India, the U.K., and the U.S. felt strong pressure to engage online, so they often felt they had no choice but to face the harassment.

- The German-speaking journalists in our sample reported less pressure to engage, while the journalists in Taiwan often did not see interacting with their audience as an important part of their jobs.
- Some had developed specific strategies for preventing harassment, including limiting what words could be typed on their Facebook pages or being more careful to include a variety of voices in a story to head off abuse.
- Other women reported feeling tension over harassment, but they opted to ignore the abuse or refrain from engaging on social media as a result.

ONLINE HARASSMENT CAN BECOME A NORMAL PART OF THE JOB

Almost all of the journalists we interviewed reported experiencing some form of harassment online that focused on their person, gender, or sexuality. “It was not criticism of my work; it was actually the destruction of my person,” recalled an online editor who worked for a German news organization. It’s worth noting that for most of our sample, we did not specifically seek out women who had experienced harassment, although the German research team did intentionally look for women who had those experiences for its seven interviews.

Some interviewees explicitly noted that the abuse differed from what their male colleagues encountered because criticism of their work included sexist attacks, or, sometimes, threats of sexual violence. Echoing what other participants told us, an online editor in India reported: “Sex is used to intimidate us. Rape is used to frighten, intimidate, and stop us...from doing our work, but at a deeper level it is actually about stopping us from having opinions, showing any semblance of independence.” Harassment happened most frequently among the 23 television journalists we interviewed.

“Sex is used to intimidate us. Rape is used to frighten, intimidate, and stop us ...”

- Indian journalist

Some of the abuse was more benign but still very difficult to deal with for the journalists. “Women have to deal with the sexual comments that males never have to deal with,” explained an American online journalist. “You’re viewed more often as a sexual objects. ... I’ve been told I need to get laid. ... They’re rare, but they’re so much worse than what my male colleagues have to deal with.”

Journalists in our sample said the attacks were most virulent when they covered stories on topics normally associated with men, such as automobiles or video gaming. Divisive topics, such as immigration, race, feminism, or politics, also seemed to elicit greater abuse. For example, a U.S. journalist said she faced denigration when she covered a story on the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights abuse of African Americans at the hands of police. “The F word was hurled at me in a way that I have never experienced before. It was a frenzy,” she said.

Similarly, a British video producer encountered intense harassment, filled with references to her gender, when she produced a story about Halal certification, a process that ensures food has been prepared

according to Islamic law. “They made some really horrible, racist comments that I should go join ISIS. I even received comments about the color of my hair being blonde, so how can I be intelligent in any sort of way?” she recalled.

Some broadcast journalists we interviewed reported that audience members either told them they were too fat or ugly to be on television or peppered them with unwanted sexual invitations that undermined their value as professionals. An anchorwoman in Taiwan explained: “Most of my followers on Facebook are male. They don’t really care about the news I share. They follow me because they want to see beautiful girls.”

Additional examples of what female journalists said can be found in the table below.

Table 1. Examples of what women in our sample reported about online harassment on the job

<i>Country</i>	<i>What the Women Said</i>	<i>Participant</i>
India	“I did this story on women being molested. ... I was trolled and so many comments said that I should go the same way as the other women went. That I should be raped and thrown to the dogs.”	Newspaper reporter
Germany	“While attending a journalism school, everybody keeps telling you: ‘Search for your niche! Personalization! Stand for something!’ ... But this can be both a blessing and a curse. If you stand for something, you become visible and present. You learn at school how to make yourself present, but not how to make yourself invisible if desired or necessary, or how to protect yourself.”	Reporter
UK	“Now and then I’ll get comments thrown at me, purely just about my hair color. I will get comments about being blonde and not being intelligent enough because of my hair.”	Video producer
US	“I think that at one time in our society it was very clear what our public and private personas are. We had them, and they were very separate. ... The Internet and social media have blurred those lines. There isn’t a public and private persona anymore. We have become an uncivilized society. ... It hurts.”	Investigative journalist
Taiwan	“I was mocked not only because I am a female but because people like to watch a graceful and beautiful anchorwoman make an embarrassing mistake.”	Television reporter

Of the journalists we interviewed, 24 reported developing specific strategies for dealing with online harassment. For example, an American television journalist uses Facebook’s word-blocker function on her professional page to prevent words like “sexy,” “hot,” or “boobs” from being posted by users. Another U.S. TV journalist said she deletes words that seem like come-ons from her professional Facebook page for fear that leaving them up will attract more of the same.

Other journalists reported shifting how they cover the news to prevent harassment. For example, an online reporter in Taiwan said she focuses on positive news so she won’t get attacked. A Latina newspaper reporter in the U.S. took a different tack. She said she faced extreme harassment online when she started her job five years ago, so now she is extra-vigilant about showing multiple sides of a story to prevent complaints that may escalate into abuse. On the other hand, a TV journalist in the U.S. said she tries to avoid details in her stories that she knows will upset people. “Yes, it affects the way I do my stories,” she said. “I am more careful.”

“You really do have to build a wall. You really have to have a thick skin.”

-- American journalist

Even those journalists who have not developed a specific strategy to deal with harassment reported that they find themselves preparing emotionally for the onslaught after a story is published. “You really do have to build a wall. You really have to have a thick skin,” noted an American journalist. A freelancer in the U.K. said she might stop engaging after a story runs to avoid the abuse. “If I write for the Sunday newspaper, those comments will appear on my Twitter feed and ... it’s thrown my whole weekend,” she noted.

All seven of the German-speaking women we interviewed felt it was important to have colleagues to rely on to talk about harassment they encountered and to help by, for instance, moderating the comments. But most of the women in our sample felt their news organizations offered little training to prepare them for how to handle the abuse or to prevent it. They reported feeling little support from managers in their plight. They worried that if they complained about harassment, they’d be labeled as hypersensitive. Online harassment, explained a U.K. video producer, is really not talked about in her newsroom. “We only really discuss it if it’s in a big scale or we’re not really prepared for it,” she said.

CONCLUSION

Our interviews suggest that online harassment is a prevalent problem across countries and that news organizations need to do more to help journalists – particularly female ones – as they encounter online harassment. Most of the journalists in our sample felt pressure to engage online, although that pressure was less for journalists in news organizations in Germany and Taiwan. But as they tried to engage, they felt emotionally spent or even felt physically threatened.

Most of the women we interviewed reported that they felt their news organizations could do more to train them on how to handle abuse and to back them up after it happened. This pointed to a need for journalism schools and professional development courses to include training about how to handle online harassment. The women sometimes felt a lack of freedom to report abuse or that the news organization saw it as their own personal problems. More stringent moderation of online comments and more oversight of professional social media pages were identified as possible solutions. Many of the journalists we spoke to wished that their supervisors saw it as part of their job to ensure a safer place to engage, free from online harassment.

METHODOLOGY

We recruited women to interview through social media, web searches, email lists, a labor union, and a public service broadcasting complaint office. Our goal was to have a diverse sample in terms of age, race, years of experience, job type, and geographic location. The women we interviewed ranged in age from 21 to 60 years old (average age: 34), and had been on the job from 9 months to 35 years at the time of the interviews. The table below shows the demographic breakdown of the journalists we interviewed.

Table 2. Participant demographics

Race/Ethnicity		Location of News Organization		Media Outlet	
Asian	36	USA	28	Newspaper	31
White	28	Taiwan	20	TV/Radio	23
Black	7	India	15	Web (Only)	16
Hispanic/Latina	4	Germany	7	Magazine	5
		UK	5		

Our interviews were conducted from spring 2016 to fall 2017, and most were done by phone. Each interview lasted 15 to 47 minutes, and all were recorded. We asked the women a series of open-ended questions about their experiences in general with interacting online as part of their jobs and whether they had experienced harassment. We prompted them to provide examples of their experiences and how the situations had impacted their work. We also asked them what they would like their news organizations to do to improve the situation.

Interviews with journalists in Taiwan were conducted in Mandarin by a Mandarin-speaking researcher, who translated them into English. The two German researchers interviewed the German-speaking journalists. The rest of the interviews were conducted in English.

To analyze our interviews, we listened to our recordings, read through our notes, and searched for similarities and differences in what these women were saying. We then categorized what they said into groups of quotes or paraphrases about their experiences with online harassment to answer our main questions outlined above.

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² Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #gamergate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(1), 208-220; Cole, K.K. (2015). "It's like she's eager to be verbally abused": Twitter, trolls, and (en)gendering disciplinary rhetoric. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(2), 356-358; Ging, D., & Norman, J.O. (2016). Cyberbullying, conflict management or just messing? Teenage girls' understanding and experiences of gender, friendship, and conflict on Facebook in an Irish second-level school. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(5), 805-821; Perreault, G.P., & Vos, T.P. (2016). The GamerGate controversy and journalistic paradigm maintenance. *Journalism*. Epub ahead of print. doi: 10.1177/1464884916670932.

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