



Online Harms & Disinformation

How can we better protect the press from online harassment and abuse?

Technological developments have increased the reach of quality journalism, allowed more diverse outlets to share historically underrepresented perspectives and created new forms of engagement between journalists and the public. With these developments has also come exposure of journalists and news organizations to new forms of online harassment and abuse.

According to recent surveys, most journalists report experiencing some form of online harassment and abuse. Online harassment also, according to the data, disproportionately affects women and minority journalists, who in particular report greater amounts of sexual and gendered harassment online.

In addition to field manuals, guides and online tools, legislative bodies around the world are responding with regulations. Yet, moderating abusive content is difficult. On one hand, heavy content restriction can — and often does — threaten freedom of speech and expression, including by creating a chilling effect on people's willingness to express views, and is also quite challenging to maintain from a pure resource perspective. On the other hand, letting "anything in" may invite further abusive content as well as have other detrimental effects on an informed society. Both scenarios raise questions about the degree of power put in the hands of platform companies over what content makes it to the public.

Key Takeaways

- I. Balancing the protections of free speech and freedom of expression is difficult and makes crafting any policy, or standards such as for content moderation, to mitigate online harm particularly challenging.
- II. Journalists desire more support from their employers when it comes to experiencing online abuse. Many organizations do not have policies or protocols in place to protect and/or support journalists encountering online abuse. One potential option for financially burdened journalism organizations is to implement [small-group peer support](#) in which individuals share their personal experiences.
- III. A 2023 [report](#) by the World Bank found that just over 30% of countries had cyber harassment laws. While journalists may receive protections from laws on stalking, defamation and/or harassment, protections can be difficult to enforce if the individuals abusing journalists reside outside of the country or use fake personas/accounts.



Key Research

I. [Mob censorship: Online harassment of US journalists in times of digital hate and populism](#)

Digital Journalism (2020)

Summary: The author introduces the term “mob censorship” to encompass the growing trend of online groups aiming to silence journalists. The author revisits this topic in a [2023 article](#).

II. [Online harassment and its implications for the journalist-audience relationship](#)

Digital Journalism (2020)

Summary: A representative sample of U.S. journalists finds harassment is particularly targeted at younger women journalists and negatively shapes the journalists’ perceptions of their audience.

III. [The chilling: A global study on online violence against women journalists](#) ICFJ (2022)

Summary: A representative sample of U.S. journalists finds harassment is particularly targeted at younger women journalists and negatively shapes the journalists’ perceptions of their audience.

IV. [No excuse for abuse](#) PEN America (2021)

Summary: A detailed analysis of reporting features found as well as those missing on social media platforms and a discussion of proposals for how to better report online abuse.

V. [‘You really have to have a thick skin’: A cross-cultural perspective of how online harassment influences female journalists](#) Journalism (2018)

Summary: In-depth interviews with women journalists from five countries reveal the types of online abuse they encounter when attempting to interact with their audiences and their personal strategies for mitigating abuse.

Legislative Activity

Country	Legislation
Australia	The 2021 Online Safety Act is designed to protect individuals from online abuse. The eSafety institution expects online service providers to play a role in minimizing online abuse and provide ways to report abuse. The Act also provides the eSafety Commission with the authority to give civil penalties to providers who do not comply with the reporting requirements.
Canada	There are several potential criminal offenses for engaging in online abuse in Canada. Bill C-63 , the Online Harms Act, is currently under consideration which would update several other Canadian laws and clarify the types of content that are classified as hate.
Japan	Japan strengthened its online cyberbullying provisions in 2022. The updated criminal code creates restrictions for online insults, though there are concerns this update will restrict free speech.
Mexico	The “ Olimpia Law ” (or Digital Violence Act), which includes coverage of digital harassment, entered into force in 2021. It includes provisions about violence against women in both private and public online settings.
Nigeria	Nigeria’s 2015 Cybercrimes Act has provisions for cyberstalking and cyberharassment. However, the law penalizes insults towards political figures and there are concerns the law is being used to target journalists.
United Kingdom	The Online Safety Act passed in October 2023. The Act sets provisions about “false communications” which are messages sent with the intent to cause physical or psychological harm. The Act also has major implications for end-to-end encryption services, which the government weakened to allow for greater monitoring of online abuse.