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Journalists & Online Abuse

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



Find the full issue primer, current legislation and events online:
<https://cnti.org/issue-primers/journalists-online-abuse/>



CNTI's Assessment

Journalists are increasingly facing online abuse, a serious threat that can lead to the mental and physical harm of journalists and undermine the integrity of the information ecosystem and democratic values. While it is unlikely we can eliminate this problem, a multi-faceted approach can significantly mitigate the issue and better protect the press.

Policy deliberation: While the goal of new legislation is to protect individuals from online harassment, it must also respect fundamental rights like freedom of speech. Journalists should be consulted on cyberbullying and online content moderation policies.

Professional support: News organizations can play a vital role in preparing journalists to recognize, prevent and respond to online through several means, including psychological support.

Governance: It will be important for platforms to moderate content without deleting lawful content. Additionally, content reporting mechanisms must be user-friendly, and abusive content must be addressed in a timely manner.

The Issue

Online harassment is generally understood as using technology to bully, threaten or aggressively target someone. It can cause journalists significant psychological and emotional distress and can be linked to **real-life violence**. Such abuse can also lead journalists to self-censor their work or distance themselves from their audience to avoid further abuse.

Some harassment campaigns are led by individuals; others are orchestrated or endorsed by **governments**. Data show that online harassment disproportionately affects **women journalists** and **journalists of color**.

The increases in online abuse are prompting responses from legislative bodies, as well as tech companies and civil organizations, but **there is a consensus** that these non-legislative actions and tools are insufficient.

What Makes It Complex?

- 1 Any policy or standard for moderating content and mitigating online harassment must also protect the freedom of expression and free speech.
- 2 Technology companies have weakened their content moderation protocols and teams, presenting novel challenges and concerns.
- 3 The online space has enabled and encouraged journalists to engage and make direct connections with the public which, while valuable, also increases the potential for online abuse.
- 4 Newsrooms do not always provide support to journalists experiencing harassment, creating mistrust within newsrooms.
- 5 End-to-end encryption complicates the government and technology companies' shared responsibility for online content moderation.

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The Center for News, Technology & Innovation (CNTI), an independent global policy research center, seeks to encourage independent, sustainable media, maintain an open internet and foster informed public policy conversations.

State of Research

While any journalist can be a target of online abuse, studies [show](#) that women and journalists of color are disproportionately affected, experiencing more intense and overt harassment. This abuse has serious consequences, including [psychological distress](#), self-censorship and [leaving the industry](#), threatening the existence of a free, independent and diverse press.

Research shows the need for more support from news organizations. Many journalists feel their employers expect them to be active on social media platforms but do not provide adequate policies or support to protect them from harassment. This can [lead to a perception](#) that the organization prioritizes its reputation over the well-being of its staff.

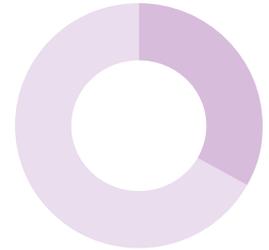
Continued research is needed to explore how technology can be used to mitigate abuse.

Notable studies

[Journalists Who Face High Risks Require Better Security Practices to Provide News](#) — CNTI (2025)

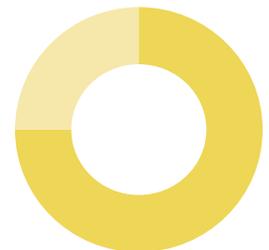
Takeaway: The study shows that there is a gap between the experiences of journalists and organizational response. As a result, there is an opportunity for news organizations to increase engagement on these issues and help journalists work more safely and effectively.

1 in 3



journalists [surveyed by CNTI](#) say they regularly face serious risks, including online abuse. (CNTI, 2025)

75%



of women journalists [surveyed by UN Women](#) reported experiencing online violence while doing their jobs. (UN Women, 2025)

State of Legislation

A 2023 [report by the World Bank](#) reveals that out of the 190 countries examined, 58 had cyber harassment laws, and 22 of those 58 had legislation related to cyber sexual harassment. These are significant gaps in protection from online abuse for journalists. While some of these laws can cover journalists by extension, there are very few with a specific focus on online abuse of journalists.

Countries have also been developing comprehensive legislation regarding online safety at large. This type of legislation is broader than cyberbullying legislation in that it focuses on many online harms (e.g., exploitation, data privacy and protection, terrorism).

Beyond legal protections, technology companies and social media platforms are also offering tools to journalists to limit online abuse such as filters to decrease the likelihood of encountering abusive content and a streamlined process of reporting abusive content to platforms. [PEN America's report](#) about how to fix reporting processes on online platforms provides potential revisions and updates.



Notable legislation

Brazil: The 2024 [Law No 14,811](#) criminalizes bullying and cyberbullying and amends the [Penal Code](#) to include fines and imprisonment. It also provides a definition of cyberbullying as "systematic virtual intimidation."