POISONED WELL

The results of a roundtable
on journalists and online hate

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Introduction

In response to several prominent instances of targeted online harassment against journalists of colour, the Canadian Association of Journalists and the Carleton University School of Journalism and Communication organized an invitation--only online roundtable for journalists to discuss the issue, its impact(s), and what could—or should—be done to address this ongoing problem.

The four-hour meeting, which took place via Zoom on October 21, 2021, was composed of four panels in which a facilitator and several discussants spoke about their area of expertise before opening up to questions from attendees. In the fifth and final session, the Toronto Star's Irene Gentle and Steph Wechsler, of the Canada Press Freedom Project, hosted a brainstorming session to generate ideas for next steps. More than 90 people from the world of Canadian journalism participated in the conversation.

This report is intended to share our collective findings more broadly. The picture of online harassment that emerged in these discussions merits a more complex and nuanced response than it has thus far received. We hope it is the beginning of a much bigger movement in Canadian journalism. The consequences of failing to act on online harassment are dire, warned session 4 discussant Jennifer Moreau: "We see this as a health and safety issue, but it's more than that. It's an equity issue... and it's also a press freedom issue."

"This kind of abuse builds up. You get traumatized. It affects your life and it affects the important work you do, even if you're trying to resist."

—*Saba Eitizaz*

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CONTEXT

THIS SESSION WAS FACILITATED BY NANA ABA DUNCAN (CARLETON UNIVERSITY).

SHIREEN AHMED (CBC), SABA EITIZAZ (TORONTO STAR), OMAYRA ISSA (CBC), AND FATIMA SYED (THE NARWHAL/CANADALAND) PARTICIPATED AS DISCUSSANTS.

> "When journalists are not able to do their work safely, openly and in complete security, then people are not able to do that service for the public."
>
> — *Omayra Issa*

> "What you don't see is a community that we have created within ourselves of racialized journalists who go through this."
>
> — *Shireen Ahmed*

Key Themes

- Hateful messages are often part of larger campaigns of harassment and intimidation.
- Politicians and even members of the media itself play a significant role in coordinating targeted harassment.
- The trauma of receiving such messages is compounded by a feeling of isolation.
- This trauma is community-wide and has substantial impacts on Canadian journalism.
- It has led some Canadian journalists of colour to leave the profession altogether, depriving the country of their much-needed talents and Canadian media from a more representative diversity of perspectives.
- Many journalists of colour support each other in this experience but they do not in general feel supported by their institutions or colleagues to an appropriate degree.

What We Heard

Onslaughts of abusive online messages are the norm for racialized journalists in Canada. The stress of receiving these messages is compounded, discussants told us, by a feeling that the majority-white institutions they work for do not understand their experience and are not willing to support them in addressing it.

"It is devastating to receive hateful messages," said discussant Omayra Issa during this session. All discussants said their main reason for sharing a selection of the hateful messages they received on social media was to raise awareness of the issue. But that awareness is double-edged, said Issa: not only can it result in further online harassment, it exposes journalists of colour who share the harassment to the racism and misunderstanding of their peers and newsroom managers.

"After I shared, I think the most common response I got was 'I'm so shocked right now,'" said Saba Eitizaz. "I think it's about time we stop saying that. This is something that has been happening to racialized journalists for a long time." Furthermore, discussants raised the issue of being perceived as attention-seeking or "playing the victim" for sharing some of the messages they received.

These responses can further marginalize journalists of colour, we heard. "I'm not interested in being the poster girl for trauma porn, which is very much how non-racialized journalists look at us," said discussant Shireen Ahmed. "Don't assume you know what is happening, particularly if you're not from my community."

At times, we heard, members of the media themselves have incited online harassment. The 2017 incident in which many high-profile Canadian journalists threw their support behind the idea of an "Appropriation Prize" was one such example of harm but such harm is common and can be as simple as authoring an opinion article.

Being on the receiving side of targeted harassment starts early for many journalists of colour, as discussant Fatima Syed shared about her own experience. Syed was still getting her Masters of Journalism at X University when she was first targeted. "It was very clear to me that no matter what I was going to do in journalism I was going to be part of this club that received hate," she said.

Syed didn't expect the outpouring of support and commiseration she received from other racialized journalists who proactively reached out to her with their contact information and time. It's through this informal network of support that many of the discussants found that the messages they received have striking similarities. In some cases, they're part of the same campaigns of hatred coordinated over the internet.

Canadian politicians, like members of the Canadian media themselves, are the instigators of some of these instances of online abuse. People's Party of Canada leader Maxime Bernier's 2021 targeting of three journalists on Twitter is one such incident that was highlighted during the discussion.

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THE WORKPLACE

THIS SESSION WAS FACILITATED BY MEGAN SHAW (CARLETON UNIVERSITY GRADUATE STUDENT/CTV NEWS).

BHUPINDER HUNDAL (GLOBAL), SHREE PARADKAR (TORONTO STAR), KARYN PUGLIESE (CBC), AND KIM TRYNACITY (CWA-CANADA) PARTICIPATED AS DISCUSSANTS.

> "It's very easy to stand up for your star journalists on Twitter or Facebook...
> But it's often the people that don't have the star power who are also at the receiving end of this abuse and actually require more of that support"
>
> — *Shree Paradkar*

Key Themes

- Trauma-informed management is necessary to mitigate the harms caused by online hate
- Letting journalists set their own level of engagement with places where they might receive hate
- Proactive, preemptive supports for all workers and engagement with leadership establishes the basis for a positive response
- Support for freelance workers is necessary to ensure they can continue working
- Newsrooms need to examine how their own coverage perpetuates harms and reinforces stereotypes

What We Heard

News organizations need to be much more proactive in educating themselves about online hate and how to protect their staff and stable of freelancers, we heard in this session. Planning ahead and creating clear guidelines is an integral part of that process, discussants said—as is allowing individual journalists to determine what is healthiest and safest for themselves in terms of social media engagement.

"We are here today because we simply have not been taken seriously," said discussant Shree Paradkar. Peers, newsroom seniors, the police, politicians, society at large: nobody is taking this issue with the gravity it merits, she said. And the stakes are high: UNESCO's recent report on online violence against women journalists around the globe found that at least 20 per cent of those who were harassed online also faced real-world threats. "This is not just some psychological gameplay," she noted.

Newsrooms need to recognize the tightrope that marginalized journalists walk, discussants said. On the one hand, they are hypervisible because of their identity; on the other, their contributions aren't treated with the same degree of respect as their more mainstream peers. That mix is isolating and leads to greater harm from online harassment, we heard. "Often when BIPOC journalists are working in mainstream media you feel very isolated and you feel very alone," noted discussant Karyn Pugliese. "You don't have that same built-in support group around you of people who immediately understand."

News organizations have made some inroads but there is far more to do, discussants said. Until 2017 or 2018, social media involvement was a key part of the job, said discussant Bhupinder Hundal. In the time since, though, as the social media environment has become ever-more toxic, his organization has encouraged their journalists to divest from platforms. "We need to loosen the reins... and allow people the space that they need in order to be like 'this is not worth it anymore,'" he said. The other thing Global News has tried to focus on, he said, is having managers work with individual journalists to decide what level of engagement was best for them and how to support their choice.

The Star has a chain of responses in place for temporary and permanent employees who receive online harassment, said Paradkar. It starts when they email to say they have received threats, and includes everything from risk assessment to—if the employee wants—support in going to the police and legal advice. There's also the offer of paid time off and mental health support, she said. Those policies don't extend to the Star's freelancers, however.

One big issue, noted discussant Kim Trynacity, is getting attention to this matter. The inroads that were made after the 2016 U.S. election "kind of dropped off the radar," she said, after the need to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic took precedence. Although online harassment is getting attention again, she says, some managers she works with within the CBC still approach online harassment with kid gloves.

Another is that sometimes, the call is coming from inside the house: all discussants highlighted the fact that news organizations need to be more thoughtful about the potential harms caused by their own coverage and even their own staff on social media.

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ENFORCEMENT

> "The people who are sending harassing and hateful messages understand the law as well. They will always stop just shy of outright violence and threats."
>
> — *Vicky Mochama*

Key Themes

- Lack of clarity in what police are actually able to do and how that's communicated to the public/survivors of violence
- Need to take online harassment seriously as a source of harm
- Knowledge gap between journalists and the law
- Justified lack of trust between Black journalists and law enforcement

What We Heard

At its best, journalism has a naturally adversarial relationship with the police as with all official sources of power, including the courts. That relationship, together with the justified lack of trust between many racialized communities and law enforcement, makes it difficult for journalists to seek protection from the law when they are harassed. Lack of clarity in how the police deal with online harassment further muddies the waters, we heard.

Speaking on behalf of the Canadian Association of Black Journalists, discussant Julie Sobowale noted that many of the organization's members have expressed that they do not trust the police enough to come forward when they experience harassment because of the well-documented history of misconduct and abuse from police in Black communities across the country. When Black journalists do approach the police, she said, "they're retraumatized." In addition, "there really isn't sufficient explanation of the process."

"What I'm not seeing and haven't seen in the entirety of my time as a journalist... is a sophisticated response that engenders trust amongst at least Black journalists especially including myself," said discussant Vicky Mochama.

On the policing side, the question of how to deal with a report of online harassment. When police don't press charges, said discussant Tanya Gripich, "it's not necessarily because it wasn't important." The threshold for laying charges for things like wilful promotion of hatred and advocating genocide—both indictable offences, the most serious offences under the Criminal Code—is extremely high, Gripich said, and requires attorney general consent before it can be brought to the courts. Any other offence, such as assault or harassment, may be hate-motivated, but that motivation doesn't come into play until sentencing—the end of a lengthy and draining process that may retraumatize the survivor.

Discussants raised the question of what meaningful enforcement would actually look like in cases of online harassment—a question that everyone from social media platforms to the federal government has been wrestling with over the past few years, with limited results. "There are other types of justice, like restorative justice," discussant Julie Sobowale noted.

Leaving aside these bigger questions, if a journalist wants to seek the police's assistance, they shouldn't be left to do it alone, discussants said. Employers and their legal council need to get involved in a support role, and something needs to be done to ensure that freelancers also have access to support. The first step for all journalists who are on the receiving end of online harassment, discussant Tanya Gripich said, is to "document everything."

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SECURITY, COMMUNITY & SELF-CARE

THIS SESSION WAS FACILITATED BY DENISE BALKISSOON (NARWHAL).

JESSE MILLER (UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA), JENNIFER MOREAU (UNIFOR), KIRAN NAZISH (COALITION FOR WOMEN IN JOURNALISM), ROWEN S. (FREEDOM OF THE PRESS COALITION) AND DAVE SEGLINS/MATTHEW PEARSON (CBC/CARLETON UNIVERSITY) PARTICIPATED AS DISCUSSANTS.

> "I think the best kind of self-care is stopping the problem from happening in the first place."
>
> — *Jennifer Moreau*

Key Themes

- Online harassment is a press freedom issue.
- Online harassment is part of a continuum of violence against journalists.
- Robust healthcare supports enable journalists to keep doing this traumatic work.
- Freelance journalists—especially women and women of colour, who are overrepresented in this population—are the most vulnerable to online harassment's impacts
- News organizations must proactively work on a plan to address online harassment.
- Online security is a significant deficit for most Canadian newsrooms.
- Successful online security is holistic.

What We Heard

Online harassment, already a significant issue, is still growing. It's important to understand that this harassment is part of a continuum of violence against journalists, said discussant Jennifer Moreau, not an isolated event. News organizations need to proactively prepare themselves to respond to online harassment and protect their journalists. Part of that process must be giving journalists the resources and education they need to protect themselves, both from being doxxed and from the trauma that receiving online harassment can cause.

As in many other sections of this roundtable, the issue of freelancer protections was also raised. Globally, freelancers are disproportionately women and especially women of colour, noted discussant Kiran Nazish—the CFWIJ monitoring from 92 countries shows this to be true for journalists who are most targeted for harassment. In Canada in particular, this group received the most frequent and vicious forms of online harassment.

Part of the problem is that many newsrooms continue to approach social platforms as neutral sources, said discussant Jesse Miller. "Within these tools the well itself is poisoned," he said. This was identified throughout the day's panels as a particular issue because journalists are actively seeking to have dialogue with their audience and contact sources via these mediums.

Engagement with these platforms—even ones as old-school as email—is a potential source of harms. Employers need to set clear guidelines on the amount of engagement they expect, as well as make resources such as health coverage available to their workers. The CBC and the Toronto Star's health coverage plans, which include robust therapy offerings, were highlighted as examples.

Narrow newsroom perspectives on digital security is another outstanding issue. Individual journalists facing abuse often understand well what they need to do to protect themselves, but newsrooms in general need to widen their gaze.

"Good security is holistic security," said discussant Rowen S. Their approach is to consider everything from accounts and devices to real-world protections like mental health supports, good work-life balance, and workplace peer support. That's important, they said, because harassment and threats online don't have a 9-to-6 schedule or focus only on professional online presence.

They suggested three areas to focus on at the beginning: good account security on all platforms; creating protocols at the newsroom level for actions like muting, blocking, taking screenshots of harassment, and reporting it internally; and not using a personal cellphone in public-facing communications. VOIP lines can be a great alternative, they said. "Your phone number is not just your real-time location, but... also probably the number that your bank uses to call you and your spouse uses to call you."

Calls to Action

In the final 40 minutes of the day, participants all contributed to a discussion of next steps hosted by Irene Gentle (Toronto Star) and Steph Wechsler (CPFP). That conversation, as well as the others throughout the sessions, inform these calls to action.

CONTEXT

- Take it seriously. Studies show that digital abuse has exactly the same level of impact as abuse in the real world, but digital abuse tends to be taken less seriously by those who don't experience it. Furthermore, digital abuse and real-world abuse are inextricable from one another: what begins online represents a physical threat as well.
- Make digital security part of the job by incorporating digital security training into every newsroom position and considering how the organization can help keep its staff safe by proactively protecting their personal information.
- Protect freelancers too. Freelancers generally don't receive help from the newsrooms they work with in digital security and dealing with online harassment. But they also don't have the resources to do it alone.
- Develop a policy. Discussants mentioned Defector Media's harassment policy as a possible blueprint for other organizations.

THE WORKPLACE

- Recognize that many journalists accept online hatred as just part of the job and work to create a culture that recognizes it as unacceptable.
- Proactively establish a clear chain of command for reporting online harassment.
- Proactively empower journalists to do trauma-informed peer support that does not further marginalize their colleagues when they are receiving harassment.
- Face up to how an outlet's coverage perpetuates racist stereotypes and other forms of harm and make a concrete plan to change.
- Diversify newsroom leadership.
- Consider how online harassment may affect every member of your newsroom, not just the biggest names.
- There is an opportunity for journalism schools to hold newsrooms to account by refusing to send students to workplaces that do not have proactive reporting policies in place.

ENFORCEMENT

- Journalists and journalist employers need more clarity about what kinds of justice they can seek from law enforcement when online harassment occurs.
- Employers need to support journalists if they choose to go to the police with legal resources.
- Freelancers need access to legal resources as well if they choose to go to the police.
- Proactively consider what law enforcement can do in a situation of online harassment rather than turning to that institution as an only recourse.
- Be aware that not all journalists want to involve the police.

SECURITY, COMMUNITY & SELF-CARE

- Newsrooms should prepare proactively to face harassment campaigns and protect their journalists.
- Media must start taking a holistic and focused approach to online security to mitigate the harms caused by online work.
- Healthcare plans for journalists must include robust support for physical and psychological therapy.
- Support needs to reach freelancers as well as staffers.

Discussion Questions

We understand that these calls to action, even if they are all taken seriously, only represent part of a complete response to the issue of targeted online harassment against journalists. Our profession can only do so much of this work, but we must lead in encouraging governments and companies to do the other parts. To that end, we leave you with three questions intended to begin a broader conversation about what must be done.

- How can journalists collectively speak back to governments and businesses like social media platforms in a way that holds them accountable for the harms of online harassment?
- How can we do the work of dealing with online harassers in a way that does not represent a conflict of interest and/or unduly involve law enforcement?
- How do we imagine and co-create a future where all journalists, regardless of their identity, can expect to conduct their work without being subject to online harassment and to receive appropriate support from newsrooms if it does occur?

Discussant & Facilitator Bios

GENERAL FACILITATORS

Brent Jolly is the president of the Canadian Association of Journalists.
Allan Thompson is the associate director of the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University as well as the Journalism Program head.

CONTEXT

Nana aba Duncan is the Carty Chair in Journalism, Diversity and Inclusion Studies at Carleton University as well as an associate professor in the school of journalism.
Saba Eitizaz is the host of the Toronto Star's daily podcast "This Matters."
Shireen Ahmed is a multi-platform sports journalist with CBC sports.
Fatima Syed is a reporter with The Narwhal as well as the host of Canadaland podcast "The Backbench."
Omayra Issa is a senior reporter for CBC News based in Saskatchewan.

THE WORKPLACE

Megan Shaw is a Carleton University graduate student and a reporter with CTV News.
Karyn Pugliese (Pabàmàdiz) is the managing editor, investigative for CBC New (television.)
Bhupinder Hundal is the news director and station manager at Global B.C.
Shree Paradkar is the Toronto Star's race and gender columnist. She is also the Star's first internal ombud.
Kim Trynacity is the CBC/Radio-Canada national branch president of the Canadian Media Guild.

ENFORCEMENT

Adrian Harewood is a professor of journalism at Carleton University.
Julie Sobowale is the western director of the Canadian Association of Black Journalists.
Tanya Gripich is a detective constable with the Toronto Police Services currently assigned to the hate crimes unit.
Vicky Mochama is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

SECURITY, COMMUNITY & SELF-CARE

Denise Balkissoon is The Narwhal's Ontario bureau chief.
Jesse Miller is an educator and consultant at Mediated Reality as well as a sessional lecturer at the University of Victoria.
Kiran Nazish is a journalist and the founding director of the Coalition for Women in Journalism.
Rowen S. is a digital security consultant/software developer at Freedom of the Press Foundation.
Dave Seglins is an investigative journalist with CBC Investigations.
Matthew Pearson is a professor of journalism at Carleton University.
Jennifer Moreau is chair of Unifor's Media Council.

Resources

EXAMPLE POLICIES

Information on Defector Media's harassment policy
https://www.adweek.com/media/defector-media-harassment-protection-policy-new-precedent/

In terms of content moderation, the EU Digital Services Act is heralded for its holistic approach to online service providers, including requiring transparency for content recommendation algorithms and obligations to prevent abuse through independent audits and risk management, etc.
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_2348

BACKGROUND

The Chilling: UNESCO's report on global trends in online violence against women journalists
https://en.unesco.org/publications/thechilling

International Federation of Journalists #YouAreNotAlone campaign
https://www.ifj.org/actions/ifj-campaigns/online-trolling-you-are-not-alone.html

CFWIJ regularly monitors the press freedom status of women in journalism and releases reports on issues like police aggression against the press
https://womeninjournalism.org/

Systemic Racism in Policing in Canada, a House of Commons report
https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/432/SECU/Reports/RP11434998/securp06/securp06-e.pdf

CBC/Radio-Canada's national survey on online hate against journalists and media
https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/Online_Harm_in_Journalism

SECURITY & SUPPORT RESOURCES

Canadian Association of Black Journalists
https://www.cabj.news/cabj-lifeline

Black Journalists Therapy Relief Fund
https://www.iwmf.org/bjtrf/

Freedom of the Press Foundation
https://freedom.press/training/

Indiegraf guide to online security for small publishers
https://indiegraf.com/indie-publisher/heres-how-small-publishers-can-be-more-secure-online/

CBC/Radio-Canada's #NotOk/Cestassez website
https://notok.cestassez.ca/en

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