

**NEW *MEDIA*, OLD CHALLENGES: HARASSMENT OF WOMEN  
JOURNALISTS IN ONLINE READERS' COMMENTS**

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# **NEW *MEDIA*, OLD CHALLENGES: HARASSMENT OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN ONLINE READERS' COMMENTS**

**Rita Basílio Simões**

## **Abstract**

The consequences for journalism of the so-called participatory turn have been profusely challenging, due to the pressure they pose to the news production process and to professional authority. Also, evidence that the level of disrespect and incivility generated by user-generated content is high, particularly in readers' comments to online news, has triggered important concerns with the digital media democratic potential. Rarely, however, have these concerns been considered from a gender perspective, even though online hate disproportionately affects women and workplace harassment be an old unsolved problem for female journalists. In this chapter, we reflect on the harassment of women journalists in online readers' comments, questioning its implications for the personal and professional sphere, and for the press freedom.

**Keywords:** Journalism, Online harassment, Gender, Readers' comments

## **Journalism and public participation**

The emergence and spread of the Internet and digital technologies triggered profound changes in the public sphere. It transformed the context in which information is selected, presented, distributed, and consumed and has reconfigured the communicational landscape, never so fertile in offering new opportunities for the democratization of discursive practices (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2009). It also diluted the traditional boundaries between reading and writing, image, and text, eroded and merged the roles of producers and consumers, and drastically altered the conditions of public communication, with new actors occupying the spaces usually dominated by traditional mediating institutions, and new forms of online sociability (Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016).

The transformative power of the internet and digitalisation has not ceased to be felt in journalism, although the extent and depth of the changes continue to be disputed, as well as the type of interventions needed to accompany them. From journalistic practices and routines (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2018; von Nordheim, Boczek & Koppers, 2018) to business models (Thurman, Picard, Myllylahti & Krumsvik, 2019; Villi & Picard, 2019), to the authority in the field (Bruns, 2005, 2018) and the relationship with audiences (Chen & Pain, 2017;

Malmelin & Villi, 2017; Paulussen, Harder & Johnson, 2017), journalism has been faced with new challenges and possibilities in the new media ecosystem.

Journalism has been always positioned as an instance that is expected to promote civic engagement, namely by encouraging collaborative interaction between professionals and citizens. With this background, new articulations between journalistic activity, public participation and technology have given rise to new concepts which, in different degrees, combinations and perspectives, discuss journalism in the face of the ideals of a network participatory culture (Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016): “popular journalism” (Gillmor, 2004), “citizen journalism” (Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasora, 2010), “participatory journalism” (Singer et al. 2011), or “participatory news” (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007). At the same time, and as audiences embraced the opportunity to become producers, readers’ comments to digital news media have evolved into a popular form of user-generated content (Chen & Pain, 2017).

Thought to be able to expand the opportunities for collaborative participation of audiences (Reich, 2011), particularly in the conversation about issues on the media agenda (Sunday, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer & Vujnovic, 2008), far beyond the possibilities offered by the traditional letters from the readers (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015), online comment spaces are generally recognized as relevant forums. They are especially relevant when it comes to bring journalists and audiences together, a requirement considered essential for the economy and sustainability of the business models (Fallows, 2012). They are also seen as important because of their democratic value. They have potential to challenge dominant framings conveyed by the media (Milioni, Vadratsikas & Papa, 2012) and promote democratic practices such as public deliberation (Boczkowski, 2005).

While highlighting the plurality of empirical realities, research on online comments reveal how they can offer conditions close to those underlying the ideal of public deliberation (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Ruiz, Domingo, Mico, Diaz Noci, Meso & Masip, 2011; Strandberg & Berg, 2013). Contrary evidence is, however, also important in research conducted in this field. Disrespect and incivility characterise a significant part of the activity carried out in online comment spaces (Chen & Pain, 2017; Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014; Reader, 2012; Silva, 2013; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019; Viscovi & Gustafsson, 2013), which appear as worrying, both in the eyes of audiences and in the eyes of journalists (Meltzer, 2015). For the public, comments are of poor quality, and yet are perceived as an opportunity offered by the digital environment (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015). Differently, for professionals, they correspond to problematic territories, where the will to distil personal feelings, often negative and hostile, flows (Mitchelstein, 2011).

For journalism professionals, online readers' comments are also sites where factual information are contested and journalists are attacked (Singer & Ashman, 2009). For these reasons, journalists often resist to participate in the discussions triggered by the news pieces they sign (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Viscovi & Gustafsson, 2013). Moreover, reading, responding to or moderating online comments represents an added activity in journalistic work, which is necessarily reflected in an accumulation of functions, frequently rejected by the professionals (Loke, 2012; Santana, 2011). Yet, their participation may be seen by the organisations to which they belong as an integral part of their activity (Chen & Pain, 2017; Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014).

### **Gender and online harassment**

If there is a common denominator to the diversity of analyses focusing on online comment spaces, it is the fact that, in general, they are silent about gender issues. Therefore, these analyses leave unexplored the singular consequences of the insulting, offensive, discriminatory, and destructive nature of the discourses that circulate in the commentary spaces for women journalists, for press freedom and social equality. With rare exceptions (Adams, 2018; Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer & Troger, 2020; Gardiner, 2018; Miller & Lewis, 2020; Pain & Chen, 2019), the role played by these platforms as facilitative spaces for sexist hate speech and other forms of violence against women has rarely been thought about. This is despite the fact that recent years have witnessed a significant increase in interest in the gendered impact of the digital environment and, particularly, the implications of abusive behaviors directed at high profile women, including women journalists, and the dominant misogynistic rhetoric on forums, blogs, and social media (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016; Binns, 2017; Citron, 2014; Philips, 2014; Massanari, 2017; Sundén & Paasonen, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Amaral & Simões, 2021; Simões, Amaral & Santos, 2021; Simões, Amaral, Santos & Brites, 2021). Thus, while acknowledging the severe impacts of offline threats and attacks directed to journalists that research continues to document (e.g. Idås, Orgeret & Backholm, 2020), the violence directed to women journalists in online comment spaces needs serious consideration.

Digital *media* were originally, and still are, seen as instances capable of offering an unprecedented challenging response to hegemonic representations of gender, by expanding the possibilities of free individual expression in the public space, and by favoring the active involvement in disruptive practices and discourses of thought naturalized in common sense. However, if it is certain that they allowed the emergence of a multiplicity of publics, often

coinciding with subaltern or counter-public groups, as Nancy Fraser (1990) referred to them, including women's groups organized in conditions to press new paths for the representation and participation (Fotopoulou, 2016), digital media are far from corresponding to the idea of a universal public sphere. Digital technologies have increased opportunities to practice and suffer different forms of harassment and abuse, experiences that research has shown to be persistent, across different types of popular platforms, from Twitter (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016) to Instagram (Simões, Amaral, Santos & Brites, 2021), and affect women and girls (Citron, 2014; Ging & Norman, 2016). Including female politicians who, compared to men in the same position, receive three times more derogatory comments directed at their appearance (Atalanta, 2018).

The prevalence of abusive behaviours targeting women with public visibility, namely political leaders, activists, feminists and journalists, has been documented, especially since the emergence of the case known as #Gamergate, which highlighted the sexism prevalent in the video game fan community and sparked public and academic attention (e.g. Massanari, 2017). Perceived as part of the broader phenomenon of online harassment against women, which covers a wide range of forms of aggression, coercion, insults, sexist hate speech, verbal offences, threats and intimidation, attacks on public figures share the same etiology: they do not embody criticism of women's actions, but of their mere existence as members of a social group. In this sense, we can think of them, like other authors (Amaral & Simões, 2021; Citron, 2014; Simões, Amaral & Santos, 2021), as one of the most recent faces of the broader continuum of violence against women which, in the lesson of Kelly (1987), has consequences that spread from the individual to the structural level.

In parallel, very often, abuse and misogynist rhetoric target public figures who discuss important women's issues, such as gender inequalities at work, sexual and reproductive rights, sexual and domestic violence, to disqualify the messages as well as their enunciating voices (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2017; Massanari, 2017; Marwick & Miller, 2014; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019). The importance of these practices is measured by the way they generate emotional responses, such as sadness, vulnerability and insecurity, anguish, pain, shock, and fear (Jane, 2014), but also forms of human consciousness through the symbolic action of policing, removing and silencing women in public space. Misogyny and anti-feminism are articulated online to promote what Ging and Siapera (2019) classify as "gender hatred" which, from an intersectional point of view, sustains multiple oppressions. Black women or women belonging to ethnic minorities, from minority religious communities or non-heterosexual women suffer more abuse than other women (Chess & Shaw 2015). Additionally, the

circumstance that attacks are often perpetrated by organised collectives that sow and spread hatred directed at female public figures (Jane, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018) highlights not only the scale of the problem, but also its significance for social (in)justice.

### **Harassment of women journalists**

Workplace harassment has been described as a heavy burden for women journalists (North, 2016; RSF, 2021) which, as with general violence directed at women, is systematically under-represented, even though movements, such as #metoo, have placed it in a less peripheral zone of the public conversation. The emergence and normalisation of readers' comments in journalistic routines allowed to put this issue, often socially devalued, in the spotlight. Online comment spaces have unleashed unprecedented opportunities for women journalists to be attacked with impunity, in particular women working on subjects considered to be the male domain, for example sports (Antunovic, 2018) and technology (Adams, 2018), with greater public exposure, such as anchors and television reporters (Miller & Lewis, 2020), and professionals writing on human rights issues, right-wing extremism, and gender equality issues (Mijatović, 2016). Although male journalists also receive hostile comments, the attacks targeting women are of a personal and sexual nature (Pain & Chen, 2018), thus configuring strategies of professional disqualification, which discourage women participation in the public sphere (Lumsden & Morgan, 2018).

A recent questionnaire survey conducted by "Reporters Without Borders" in 122 countries on five continents suggests that 73% of violence committed against journalists occurs online, falls mostly (83%) under the typical conduct of sexual harassment, and affects particularly professional women's rights, sport, and political specialists (RSF, 2021). With an equally global dimension, but restricted to female tech journalists, another questionnaire survey found that nearly two-thirds of respondents have experiences of online abuse, experiences which, for one in three journalists, have been intensifying (Adams, 2018). Another study conducted in the United States offers a less dramatic picture of the incidence of online harassment, although it acknowledges the existence of factors, such as desensitization, that may contribute to explain the reduced weight of documented abuse experiences. Still, the prevalence of harassment in the working lives of women journalists is highlighted, particularly those who are younger and work in television, who not only face greater levels of abuse, but are subjected to more severe forms of intimidation and aggression (Lewis, Zamith & Coddington, 2020).

The existing evidence in this field is also qualitative in nature and offers a generally detailed description of lived experiences. This is, in fact, the dominant strategy of the scarce research

with impact on abuses to journalists published in the last decade (Simões, Alcantara & Carona, 2021). From these studies we know that, despite the weight of socioeconomic and cultural specificities, women journalists in various regions of the world encounter similar forms of online harassment, which affect their professional activity (Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer & Troger, 2020). Harassment is so constant and aggressive that it is experienced as a normalised occurrence, in online and offline life.

The ways of coping with aggression also show of how online harassment is experienced as a traumatic experience, particularly by women. It is mostly women journalists who report reactions such as resorting to 'emotion regulation' strategies, both online and offline, to manage and mitigate the emotions felt (Miller & Lewis, 2020). It is also female professional journalists who report changing their interactions with audiences in response to attacks (Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer & Troger, 2020), avoiding posting on commenting and social media platforms and closing their accounts. Other documented reactions highlight how online harassment affects journalistic content, particularly when female professionals adapt their work, avoid writing about topics considered to be drivers of attacks and consider quitting journalism (Binns, 2017).

The backdrop against which these types of responses should be framed is that of the continuum of violence against women. Since offline sexual victimization falls disproportionately on women, they can be expected to perceive harassment as a serious threat and act accordingly (Lewis, Zamith & Coddington, 2020). The broader horizon that allows us to look ahead is overshadowed by self-silencing and self-censorship, which affect both the freedom of expression of women journalists (Mijatovic, 2016) and freedom of information and the health of democracy (Waisbord, 2020).

### **Concluding notes**

Online harassment directed at women journalists can be thought of in the light of the multiple challenges that journalism faces in the present time. One of these challenges, which is also a paradox, lies in the strange relationship between the democratic value of public participation and the levels of incivility and disrespect that characterize online practices, particularly in readers' comments. These are forums that carry the potential to bring organizations closer to their audiences, fostering reciprocity which, however, is limited. It is limited because the prevailing hostility restricts the ways in which especially women journalists interact with audiences in mutually beneficial ways without being discredited and sexually harassed (Chen et al., 2020). At the same time, the constellations of values that structure professional ideology,

such as objectivity, discourage the acceptance of the gatekeeper role outside the territory of informative production, conditioning the involvement of journalists in the management of content originated by audiences (Chen & Pain, 2016).

Another challenge that also represents a contradiction arises from the normative ideal of promoting free speech. This has limited the investment in ethical-legal models that consistently regulate online comment spaces, against the fundamental rights and guarantees that protect the community journalists and press freedom. Despite the existence of editorial concerns with these forums and the adoption of some kind of regulatory policies, such as the moderation of conversations, a culture of low interference persists. As Simões and Camponez (2020) contend, we are on the border between a tighter regulation system, managed by some newsrooms, and a more or less declared lack of responsibility, when the news media host on external platforms, such as Facebook, their online comment spaces. The question that arises is why we continue to place less value on professional freedom and independence, particularly of women journalists subjected to repeated harassment, than on comments often inflated with hate.

The paradoxical and challenging image of journalism is also clear when we look at the emancipatory promise of the Internet and digital technologies. Potentially, we would have, today, unprecedented conditions to destabilize the power exercised by traditional normative models and resist the prevailing conceptions of what constitutes “the” voice of authority, including within the culture of newsrooms. However, the chances of seeing non-hegemonic discursive practices on the ground, which challenge, for example, the still heavy reliance on male sources and the under-representation of gender issues (GMMP, 2020), may be slimmer than one might assume. Online harassment seems to be instrumental in this process, by representing for women journalists harmful and traumatic individual experiences, which curtail their professional freedom and, in many cases, silence their most disruptive voices.

Notably, online harassment in readers’ comments is a way of policing and disciplining the community of journalists, with dangerous repercussions for press freedom. It is therefore not a personal issue, but a social problem, which fuels structural disadvantages. In particular, it contributes to devaluing the freedom and credibility of professionals moving in the field, and favors the inhibition of women's public participation.

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