

# Journalism students who are women of color are more likely to face 'violent, sexualized harassment'

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From left, journalism professors Jody Santos, Myojung Chung and Meg Heckman. Credit: Alyssa Stone and Adam Glanzman/Northeastern University

A recent study conducted by three Northeastern professors confirmed the unfortunate reality that many journalism students who are women of color face while reporting the news: They are more likely to be exposed to "violent, sexualized harassment."

The study was the product of the work of journalism professors Jody Santos, Meg Heckman and Myojung Chung. It involved anonymously interviewing hundreds of graduate and undergraduate journalism students across the country about their experiences in the field, then conducting follow-up interviews with smaller groups.

They presented their findings in March at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's Southeast Colloquium, where the educators received positive feedback about their efforts as well as calls for more research into the problem of the [harassment](#) of young reporters.

Heckman, the lead co-author of the study, explains the idea for the project was prompted in part by comments received by many journalism educators from students and recent graduates who wished they were better prepared for the anti-press and gendered harassment they faced while in the field or out on school assignments. She, Santos and Chung discussed the issue and poked around, but they were not able to find much research on the extent of the problem. So, they took matters into their own hands.

Last summer and fall, the professors sent out an [anonymous survey](#) to hundreds of journalism students, asking numerous questions about the type and source of harassment they experienced, how they dealt with it and how their institutions of higher education responded. Heckman, Santos and Chung also recruited smaller groups of students for focus groups, where they dove into their experiences of intimidation. The results were telling.

"The main takeaway is that student journalists are not practicing journalism in some idyllic, parallel universe where they're insulated from the challenges that [professional journalists](#) out of college face," says Heckman, who spearheaded the focus groups with Santos. "One of those

problems is unfortunately anti-press harassment, and journalism educators need to do a better job of acknowledging that and preparing students to deal with it as much as they can."

The professors' research does not detail the prevalence of the harassment that aspiring reporters face, as they were not able to survey a representative subset of journalism students in the United States that was large enough to extrapolate data from. However, the study can be viewed more so as an exploration, providing a revealing look into what kinds of intimidation journalism students face, how it impacts their long-term career outlooks and how colleges and universities can better respond to the problem, according to Heckman.

"This study matters beyond reasons revolving around pedagogy. It tells us about the culture of journalism itself and how norms in the newsroom and other areas of the industry may be preventing students from historically marginalized backgrounds from pursuing careers in the field," Heckman says.

Heckman, whose research focuses on the role women play in journalism and [gender equity](#) in the industry, says many journalism students in the focus groups reported experiencing harassment early on in their careers. She also discovered the severity of that intimidation differed sharply between men and women, confirming the "unfortunately pervasive gendered nature of harassment," according to her.

"Women, particularly women of color, are more likely to experience or be the target of violent, sexualized harassment," Heckman says. "Any journalist anywhere is going to write a story and experience criticism. Male journalists when they publish a story may get told by critics their story sucks, while women journalists get told they're ugly and they're going to get sexually assaulted. That tends to be the difference."

Journalism students of different racial backgrounds also experienced varying types of harassment. Students who participated in the study who identified as Asian were more likely to say they were threatened with academic or professional retaliation for their reporting, while students who identified as Black were more likely to report they were threatened with sexual harassment or violence. The sample size is small, Heckman points out, so she urges people to not extrapolate too much from the findings. However, she believes the results were telling.

"Our findings point to the need to think about and consider how people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds experience harassment in the newsroom," Heckman says. "This finding is not unique to us, but hopefully our findings help strengthen other arguments to this point."

The harassment that journalism students face takes different forms, Santos points out. Some students are stonewalled by the very institutions they are studying at and discouraged from tackling certain stories with threats of academic retaliation, while others are targeted by people who are at the center of their stories or who just dislike their reporting.

However, whether it's intimidation by a journalism student's own college or university or by a person in their story, the impact remains largely the same, Santos notes: That student is discouraged from pursuing their passion. Some students who were interviewed for the study opted to major in a different subject after being harassed, while others decided not to practice journalism altogether.

"We definitely saw instances where the harassment really took such a psychological toll that students went into an adjacent career, not journalism, but something involving writing or research," Santos says. "It's very, very unfortunate. These are some really talented journalists."

Chung, who spearheaded the surveys and the quantitative research, was

surprised by the sources of harassment that journalism students reported. Before conducting the study, she assumed the main source of intimidation would be anonymous readers who did not know the author but were disgruntled by what was being reported on. However, she was alarmed to find that many students said they were harassed by their peers, professors or school administrators, those she called "insiders."

"There was more harassment from insiders. I thought it would be mainly from outsiders, anonymous readers, but that was not the case," Chung notes. "That was actually pretty striking to me."

The findings from the study were saddening, Chung says, largely because of the ways journalism students reported their colleges and universities mishandled instances of harassment and did not prepare them to face this kind of intimidation. In their responses to the survey, many students said they felt unsupported by their schools, which was the primary reason why they did not pursue a career in journalism.

It was not so much the harassment that [student](#) journalists faced that dissuaded them from entering the field, but the fact that they felt they were not trained, prepared or taken care of by their schools, according to Chung.

"For instance, when students talked to their professors or administrators or the university itself regarding this harassment, it was not really appropriately addressed by them, and they didn't get the help they needed," Chung says. "That was the saddest part of the finding, and it should be alarming for universities."

Provided by Northeastern University

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