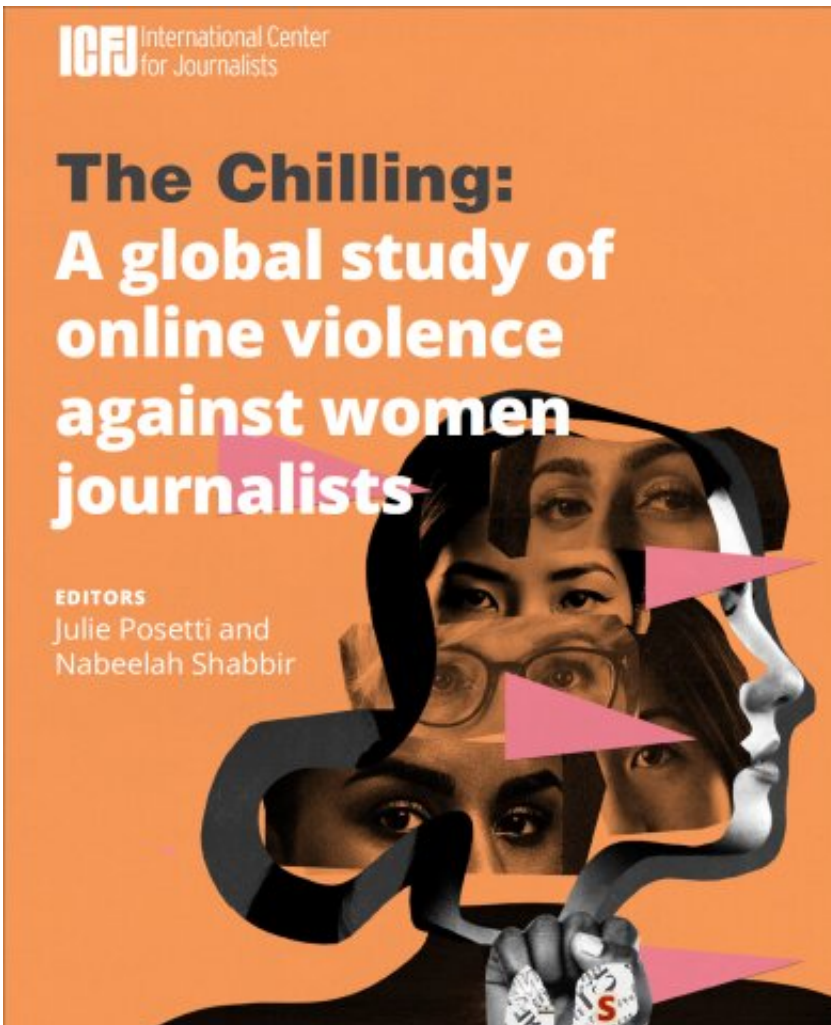


New report reveals link between online and offline violence against women journalists

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Credit: International Center for Journalists

A report into online violence against women journalists draws on Department of Computer Science research to call for urgent action by U.K. policymakers to protect lives, livelihoods and press freedom.

The [report](#) is the result of a three-year study covering 15 countries and is the most geographically, linguistically, and ethnically diverse scoping of online violence against women journalists to date.

The study, commissioned by UNESCO, found that online violence against women journalists in the U.K. is frequently associated with populist politics, polarizing political debates and that the pandemic has worsened the situation. Alarming, the report also found a strong link between online violence and offline attacks in the U.K., especially with regard to stalking.

The study draws on the experiences of nearly 1,100 journalists, two big data case studies examining 2.5 million social media posts directed at journalist and Nobel laureate Maria Ressa (the Philippines) and multi award-winning investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr (U.K.), along with detailed individual country case studies.

The study was led by Dr. Julie Posetti, ICFJ's Global Director of Research and a senior researcher at the Center for the Freedom of the Media (CFOM) at the University of Sheffield. It also draws on research by Dr. Diana Maynard and Professor Kalina Bontcheva from the University of Sheffield's Department of Computer Science and CFOM.

The book-length study is calling for governments, Big Tech, the news industry, legal and judicial actors and civil society to do more to tackle what is described as a crisis of online violence towards women journalists. It was edited by Dr. Posetti and Nabeelah Shabbir.

The researchers say the report's findings should serve as a wake up call

for U.K. policymakers as the draft Online Safety Bill—a proposed piece of legislation designed to regulate the tech sector, safeguard people online and protect freedom of expression—is delayed once again with no known date for when it will return to the House of Commons.

Abuse directed at journalists in the UK

The U.K. and Northern Ireland were one of 15 in-depth global case studies in the report, drawing on extensive desk research and in-depth interviews with 22 journalists and experts.

The study found that online violence against women journalists in the U.K. is frequently associated with populist politics, and polarizing political debates—such as Brexit.

The pandemic has worsened the situation for women journalists with digital conspiracy networks targeting reporters, and one member of the Conservative government at the time attacking two journalists for their critical reporting of responses to COVID-19.

One interviewee for the report, BBC disinformation reporter Marianna Spring, documented her own experience of online violence in a documentary broadcast in 2021.

In partnership with ICFJ researchers, the University of Sheffield computer scientists conducted a big data analysis of approximately 75,000 tweets directed at Spring from March to August 2021 and found more than half—55%—of the abuse was designed to discredit Spring as a journalist and undermine her public interest journalism, while 27% was sexist and misogynistic (the remainder was classified as generally abusive).

Link between online and offline violence

A strong link between online and offline violence in the U.K. has been revealed by the study. The correlation of online violence and offline attacks against women journalists is significant, especially with regard to stalking.

The report documented four cases of physical stalking associated with online harassment. In three cases, the perpetrators harassed the journalists at their newspapers, and in the fourth case, a stalker left a message for a BBC journalist Marianna Spring on the noticeboard at the train station she uses to commute to work.

Northern Irish journalists covering sectarian paramilitary activity and organized crime are particularly vulnerable to offline attacks seeded online, according to the report.

Three cases of online-offline violence targeting women journalists in Belfast surfaced during the course of the research. The case of one interviewee, Sunday World's Patricia Devlin, is emblematic. She received credible death threats online which were accompanied by graffiti on city walls featuring her name next to the crosshairs of a gun, and threats of sexual violence were also made against her children.

For the rest of the U.K., the situation has become so serious that the U.K.'s biggest commercial news publisher—Reach, PLC—created the position of Online Safety Editor in mid 2021 and many journalists featured in the research reported that they have increased their physical security, highlighting their sense of vulnerability and awareness of the potential of real world consequences of digital attacks.

Dr. Julie Posetti said, "Online violence towards women journalists aids and abets impunity for crimes against journalists, and it must be tackled

urgently. This requires political actors who instigate and amplify online violence to be restrained and penalized."

"It also demands that the platforms be held accountable for their role as vectors for online violence, through freedom of expression-respecting regulation by the states which claim that they want to tackle issue of impunity and protect journalists, including the U.K."

"This is even more urgent in the context of Twitter's recent takeover by a billionaire who has not signaled that he understands that protecting users from hate speech enables freedom of expression."

Professor Kalina Bontcheva, said, "Our report has found that we are now at a crisis point in the level of violence being directed towards women journalists. The vast majority who took part in the study had suffered from online violence, so U.K. policymakers need to take [urgent action](#) now in order to protect the lives of those who are doing such an important job in society.

"A swift passing of the draft Online Safety Bill is of utmost importance, not only on journalist safety grounds, but also to limit exposure to online harms for children, minorities, public figures, and all U.K. citizens. Its current delay, however, is an opportunity to include the key recommendations arising from our research to help keep journalists safe."

Incidence of online violence

Nearly three quarters of the women journalists surveyed said they had experienced online violence in the course of their work. Threats of physical violence, including death threats, were identified by 25% of the women survey respondents, and sexual violence was identified by 18%.

Thirteen percent described threats of violence against those close to them, including children and infants, as features of attacks.

Fifteen percent reported experiencing image-based abuse, such as manipulated photos or videos, stolen images and explicit images shared publicly without permission. 29 survey participants said they had been victims of "deep fakes," such as manipulated videos, often associated with fake porn, designed to damage reputations.

Almost half—48%—of the women journalists surveyed reported being harassed with unwanted private social media messages, highlighting that much online violence targeting women journalists occurs in the shadows of the internet, away from public view. Several of the interviewees also experienced offline stalking which had begun online via direct messaging.

Abuse directed at Maria Ressa and Carole Cadwalladr

As part of the study, the University of Sheffield's research team undertook two big data case studies using natural language processing (NLP) and network mapping techniques to assess over 2.5 million [social media posts](#) directed at two prominent journalists— Maria Ressa, co-founder of Rappler, and Carole Cadwalladr, investigative journalist and columnist at the Observer.

The team's analysis found that Cadwalladr, whose investigative work exposed the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, was the target of 10,400 separate instances of obvious abuse between December 2019—January 2021. The abuse was highly gendered and designed to humiliate, belittle and discredit the journalist on both a personal and professional level.

Cadwalladr described the abuse as feeling like the digital equivalent of a mob attack. "A few hundred years ago I would have been burned at the stake," she said as part of the research.

In the past three years, Cadwalladr's experience of online abuse and harassment has also been influenced by the coronavirus pandemic. She said she has become a "national punching bag," in the report.

Dr. Diana Maynard, said, "One of the most revealing aspects of this study was when we showed the results of the data analysis to Ressa, Cadwalladr and Spring, and they were shocked at what we found. Even though they were the ones receiving the abuse, they hadn't been able to fully appreciate the sheer volume and severity of the toxicity, because no one can process hundreds of thousands of messages in their head. And they finally felt vindicated."

Abuse toward Black and minority women journalists

The discrimination that Black and minority women journalists experience offline is amplified and exacerbated online, where they face a triple burden of intersectional abuse, according to the study. The research found they are attacked on the basis of their sex, their status as journalists, and because of the color of their skin. In some cases, they are simultaneously abused because of their religion and their sexual orientation.

While Black and minority women journalists are largely absent in prominent and senior British media roles, they are among the most clearly identifiable targets of gendered online violence, according to the report.

Call to action

The study puts forward a series of recommendations for governments and policymakers, including the establishment or reinforcement of independent national bodies/ regulators to ensure compliance with the relevant national and international laws designed to protect the safety of women journalists.

The U.K.'s draft Online Safety Bill, which has been several years in the making, has now been delayed twice and there is no known date for when it will return to the House of Commons. Under the draft Bill, telecommunications regulator Ofcom would be given powers to regulate online safety and issue fines to companies which breach the legislation.

Key recommendations:

- Recognize that online violence is real, as is the psychological injury it causes.
- Avoid blaming women for the online violence they experience, and do not expect them to bear the responsibility for managing or combating the problem.
- Consider introducing protocols and guidelines to restrain elected representatives, their staff, and other officials who engage in gendered online violence against [women](#) journalists, with punitive measures attached, and ensure prosecution of those who perpetrate attacks.
- Make social media companies more clearly accountable for combating online harms.
- Arrive at a clear legal definition of what social networks and messaging services are, and how they are regulated under national laws.
- Require social media companies to notify users who have reported online [violence](#), on what actions have been taken, when and why/why not. These responses could include referrals to informed civil society organizations and effective resources.

- Establish or reinforce independent national bodies/regulators to oversee compliance with the relevant national and international laws and regulations designed to defend online safety.
- Introduce regulation that provides victims of online harms with access to appeals against company (in)action through an independent, national ombuds facility.

More information: ICFJ-UNESCO Global Study: The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists.

www.icfj.org/our-work/icfj-unesco-global-study-women-journalists

Provided by University of Sheffield

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