“I Really Wanted Them to Have My Back, But They Didn’t” – Structural Barriers to Addressing Gendered Online Violence Against Journalists

Keywords: online violence, online harassment, safety of journalists, women journalists, newsrooms, journalism

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Abstract:

Despite rising scholarly interest in online violence as an “occupational hazard” for journalists, we know little about the dynamics that shape the often-limited support given by media organizations to media workers affected by online violence. In this study, I explore how the working environment of journalists shapes or constrains opportunities for addressing gendered online violence. Through a total of 27 interviews with experts and media workers in the United Kingdom and India, I find that these structural barriers play out through three main dynamics: stratified access to support resources, workplace norms that punish reporting online violence as signs of “weakness”, and precarious conditions that leave journalists with little control over their work. Adverse press freedom conditions also appear to exacerbate the impact of these dynamics. Relating these findings to broader inequality regimes in the contemporary working world, I argue that online violence both reinforces and is reinforced by inequality regimes within media organizations. In the same way that organizations often fail to adequately address other forms of workplace harassment, structural barriers complicate newsroom responses to online violence.

Introduction

Online violence can be considered an “occupational hazard” for journalists working today. As journalists face increasing professional demands to engage with their audiences and sources online (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020), they are also more vulnerable to violence, abuse, and harassment in digital spaces. Today, researchers are increasingly situating the barrage of abusive Tweets, threatening direct messages, and coordinated doxxing campaigns that many journalists face on a spectrum of efforts to erode press freedom (Waisbord 2020; Carlsson, Robinson and Lewis 2020).

However, online violence does not affect all journalists equally. Women are disproportionately targeted (Chadha, Steiner, and Guha 2017; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Posetti et al 2021, Miller 2022). Miller (2022) found in a survey that women journalists experience more overall harassment initiated from outside the newsroom than men, as well as specifically experiencing more sexual harassment. A UNESCO/ICFJ global survey found that 73% of 625 women journalist respondents reported having experienced some form of online violence, and noted that misogynist online violence intersected with racism, homophobia, religious bigotry and other forms of discrimination (Posetti et al 2021). Despite this, women journalists often report a lack of structured support from their employers, who frequently instead put the onus for managing online violence on the individual – i.e. leaving the journalist to block and mute other users or independently seek psychological and legal support (Holton et al 2021).

As journalists occupy a vital role in maintaining functioning democracies (Hamada 2021), the grave societal implications of online violence have recently received increased scrutiny from a variety of

disciplines. Synthesizing the recent emergence of research on online violence, Miller (2021) argues that online violence targets journalists simultaneously for their professional journalistic identity and for any other marginalized identity they happen to inhabit. Pointing to the normalization of managing online violence as part of journalistic routines, especially for women (Chen et al 2020), similarly to the expected normalization of harassment and discrimination from inside the newsroom (Flatow 1994), Miller (2021) adds to a growing number of voices calling for a holistic conceptualization of how violence and discrimination play out in the media sector, online and offline. These also include Shah's (2017)'s argument that the offline and online sphere should not be considered as separate, particularly when considering the safety of the "digital subject".

Thus, this article seeks to draw from research on "internal" gendered harassment within organizations to explore structural barriers that problematize addressing gendered online violence targeting journalists. We know that newsrooms often fail to provide systematic support to their workers experiencing online violence (Holton et al 2021), but there is currently a lack of empirical work diving deeper into the mechanisms that could explain this, despite previous research on "offline" gendered workplace harassment in the newsroom (North 2016, Sreedharan and Thorsen 2021). Drawing from organizational studies, specifically Acker's (1990, 2006) concept of "inequality regimes" maintaining power structures within the workplace, I explore how mechanisms of control and compliance that prevent effective action against physical gendered workplace harassment also extend to cases where the source of harassment is "external" to the newsroom and situated in digital space.

The second contribution of this exploratory study is a comparative and contextual perspective through considering the role of press freedom context on newsroom support for media workers targeted by online violence. Press freedom is here understood as per UNESCO's conceptualization as implying "the liberty to publish and distribute content on any platform, free from the control, censorship, or harassment of the state" (UNESCO 2022) but also proactive and protective measures notably on the safety of journalists. The presence of independent journalism is generally understood as a key component of a functioning public sphere within democratic societies (McNair 2009). For this reason, increased online attacks against journalists serves as a warning sign of democratic erosion (Waisbord 2020). Several scholars have pointed out the importance of considering political context when exploring the micro-level of journalist safety online and offline (Miller 2021; Panievsky 2021; Hamada 2020). However, we still lack an understanding of how macro-level contextual factors shape meso-level organizational responses to journalist safety issues.

Despite this, a plethora of studies in a variety of geographical and cultural contexts have found remarkable similarities in how gendered online violence and harassment affect journalists (Chadha, Steiner, and Guha 2017; Chen et al 2020; Posetti et al 2021). Chen et al (2020)'s comparative study of women journalists dealing with online violence in five countries found that women journalists in all

five countries reported that online violence had negative effects on their careers and well-being, and that their managers displayed a lack of understanding or prioritization of the issue. Focusing on press freedom context as a macro-level factor that may shape opportunities for action at the organizational level (Miller 2021), this study explores the latter dynamic in greater depth.

This study is thus centered around the following research questions: How does the working environment of journalists create barriers to addressing gendered online violence? How are barriers to addressing online violence within media organizations perceived in different press freedom contexts?

Online violence as an occupational hazard for journalists

In this paper, I mainly use the term "online violence" as a broad reference to behaviors ranging from verbal abuse or offensive language, stalking, spreading rumors or misinformation, sharing personal and private information such as addresses or whereabouts ("doxxing"), altering images or videos, making threats of violence, and many other modalities (Sobieraj 2018). Even though these behaviors may be experienced differently by the targeted individual, it is often the accumulated effect of these behaviors over time that exacerbates their harmful effects (Posetti et al 2021). My choice of the word "violence" rather than "harassment" is motivated by the structural implications of such behaviors as expressions of wider power structures (Sobieraj 2020; Posetti et al 2021), while I acknowledge that "harassment" is considered the established term to such behaviors when situated in the workplace (Miller 2021).

While journalists indeed occupy a particular role in protecting public access to information, they are not the only professional group that actively maintain an online presence as part of their work, thus putting themselves at risk for online "external" (originating from outside the immediate workplace) harassment and violence (Grandey et al 2007). Indeed, the lines between "internal" and "external" harassment can often be blurred in professions where workers maintain a significant digital presence (Hodson et al 2018), as found by Sobieraj's (2020) study of women in a variety of professional roles targeted by online violence.

This is the case for today's journalists, who are virtually required by their job description to maintain an active online presence in order to build a brand, develop a following, and interact with audiences, potential employers or sources (Lewis et al 2014 Coe et al 2014; Molyneux et al 2019; Finneman, Thomas, and Jenkins 2019). If a journalist spends a significant part of their working day on Twitter (and perhaps none at all in a physical office), drawing a clear line between what is "inside" and "outside" their working environment is no obvious matter.

However, journalists are still tied to specific media organizations for their work, even as freelancers (Cohen 2019. This leads us to the question whether the organizational dynamics that determine responses to online violence should be considered wholly separate from those that shape newsroom responses to other forms of violence and discrimination. Decades of sociological research have explored how structural barriers within organizations prevent effective action against gendered

harassment in the workplace (Minnotte and Legerski 2019). This research highlights that factors such as (gendered) organizational hierarchies (Ollo López and Nuñez 2017), masculine-dominated workplace cultures (North 2016, Ross 2001, Hart 2019), and backlash from managers (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012) prevent the issue of (sexual) workplace harassment from being taken seriously within (media) organizations and inhibit effective support mechanisms.

Joan Acker's (1990, 1991, 2006) concept of inequality regimes serves as a useful theoretical starting point for exploring these barriers. "Inequality regimes" refer to the "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker 2006, 443). These are expressed through control and compliance mechanisms that aim to maintain the status quo of power relations, the organizing processes and logics of the organization, and attitudes around the legitimacy of these processes in the workplace. Crucially, Acker argues for the importance of considering material working conditions and labor-capital relations as enmeshed with structures of gender and racial inequality in order to see how organizations maintain existing power relations. Recent work has shown that (gender-based) inequality regimes have been remarkably persistent despite "new" organizational practices informed by technological changes, such as in the tech industry (Alfrey and Twinley 2017), and even in coworking spaces bringing together several different organizations (Sargent et al 2020).

Works influenced by Acker (Healy et al 2019, Minnotte and Legerski 2019) have also explored how even in organizations that try to live up to egalitarian ideals, wider power structures may still end up being reproduced through (conscious or unconscious) normative practices, processes, and mechanisms of control and compliance. For example, women workers may be reluctant to report sexual harassment to their supervisors for fear of being negatively stereotyped as "weak" or "incapable", and thus risk losing their job. The emotional labor required to avoid "seeming weak" is often demanded as a form of deprioritizing the worker's safety and well-being in favor of economically driven organizational goals (Hochschild 1983). This is an element of Bergman's (2019) argument that just as sexual harassment itself is a method of protecting inequality regimes within organizations, the "harassment system" of reporting and accountability-seeking often tends to perform the same function.

There are many indications that the "online harassment system" may work similarly. Jane's (2017, 2018) work on "gendered cyberhate" as workplace harassment and economic vandalism highlights that the material consequences of gendered online violence show significant similarities with those resulting from physical workplace harassment. Studying newsroom responses to gendered online violence in the US, Holton et al (2021) found that most newsrooms lacked system-level approaches (i.e. internal policies or training) to online violence, instead effectively leaving it up to women journalists to deal with it as "personal trouble", particularly in the context of individualization in the media sector as a whole (Beck-Gernsheim 2012, García 2019), putting any burdens of occupational

risks on the individual and problematizing collective resistance – all factors that Acker (2006) identifies as cornerstones of enduring inequality regimes.

Addressing online violence in a context of precarity

These dynamics should also be understood in the context of a media sector whose business models are being eroded, largely by the shift in advertising revenue to online platforms (UNESCO 2022). A global survey found that two-thirds of journalists felt less secure in their job as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Posetti, Bell and Brown 2020), but this is far from a new development. Widespread precarity has long resulted in a large section of the journalistic profession enjoying very limited protections or security from their employers (Chadha and Steiner 2022). The isolation and insecurity experienced by freelancers (Cohen 2016, 2019) is particularly important to consider in this context, as it has been shown to complicate the implementation of effective support mechanisms addressing workplace harassment (Ollo López and Núñez 2017).

It is important to acknowledge that precarity does not look the same in media systems everywhere. As Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020) find in their study of precarity among Nigerian journalists, traditional definitions of precarity are often infused with a Western perspective which assumes a default norm of full employment, which has never been a reality for many journalists in other contexts. They further argue that journalists in post-colonial societies experience different mechanisms of control, safety and instability, with harassment and violence as a contributory factor to all. In this view, online violence can increase a sense of danger and instability for journalists overall in such environments, further contributing to an overall state of precarity (Chadha and Steiner 2022).

With this in mind, it is also important to note that the idea of stable, full-time employment has also never been the norm for women both in and outside of the West, due to patriarchal norms that exclude women from participating in paid work while assigning them the brunt of care work duties (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Journalism worldwide carries a legacy of being a profession dominated by men (Topić and Bruegmann 2020). Studies on newsroom culture in several countries have indicated that women journalists must navigate a masculine-coded culture within their working environments, which can take the expression of reinforcing gender stereotypes when assigning work tasks, being excluded from male social spaces, and endemic (sexual) harassment (North 2009, 2016; Kanagasabai 2016; Gudipaty 2017; Rao 2018; Rao and Rodny-Gumede 2020). In Acker's view (2006), these dynamics function as (sometimes internalized) mechanisms of control and compliance that punish women seeking to take action against the discrimination they experience in their working environment, maintaining existing power structures.

Gender-based marginalization is thus often already at work within newsrooms even before the question of responding to gendered online violence is brought up. This is significant in light of

Miller's (2021) argument that particularly in environments hostile to the press, one's identity as a journalist intensifies oppression one may already experience in regard to other identities. Online violence compounds mechanisms of exclusion from both professional life and public space in general as a tactic that can be utilized by audiences to silence certain voices (Waisbord 2020).

Methodology

While an extensive body of work has explored the efficacy of various interventions against internal workplace harassment, we currently lack systematic knowledge of what effective support mechanisms against online violence should look like in a newsroom. In order to understand what might prevent a newsroom from implementing these mechanisms, I thus identified a need to explore this dimension of my research questions. For this reason, the data collection was divided into two phases. In the first phase, I conducted interviews with professionals working with newsrooms in a variety of cultural contexts on online violence issues from civil society organizations, professional networks for journalists, and direct peer-support services.

My choice of the United Kingdom and India as the two countries where I would identify newsroom cases in order to address my second research question regarding press freedom was supported by previous studies in both contexts. Gendered online violence is rampant in both countries (Udupa 2017; RSF 2018, Rao 2018; Gardiner 2018; Chen et al 2018). Multiple surveys have also shown that newsrooms in both countries are stratified along axes of inequality, including (but not limited to) gender (NCTJ 2017, UN Women 2019, Oxfam India 2019), though the specific dynamics differ (with caste and religion being two India-specific factors, while race and class dynamics have been highlighted in the UK). Studies on newsrooms in the UK (Gardiner 2018; North 2016) and India (Gudipaty 2017, Rao 2018, Sreedharan and Thorsen 2021) have also pointed to the prevalence of gendered hierarchies and associated effects (including sexual harassment) in media organizations. Additionally, while it is important to mention that the Indian news media landscape is much more diverse than the UK, both media landscapes are characterized by a rise of digitally native publications, high social media use among journalists, and similar declines in advertising revenues for print media exacerbated during COVID-19, causing many news organizations to cut down on staff (Reuters Institute 2021),

Despite these similarities, both countries currently find themselves in drastically different press freedom environments. The 2022 World Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders ranks the United Kingdom 24th in the world, while India places 150th (out of a total of 180 countries). Reporters Without Borders highlights that ever since the 2014 election victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Indian media has faced increasingly intense pressure to conform to the Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) party line – often through methods such as police violence against journalists, ambushes and arrests, targeted Internet shutdowns, reprisals instigated by local officials, or even killings of journalists (RSF 2022, Rao 2018). Online violence (or "*gaali*") is often an explicit tactic for Hindutva ideologues to target those they identify as counter to their nationalist agenda (Udupa 2017).

Although the United Kingdom has its own press freedom issues, with blacklisting of government-critical media outlets particularly frequent during the COVID-19 pandemic (RSF 2022), journalists do not generally face the same level of physical threat or government-sponsored harassment. However, journalists belonging to marginalized groups are still disproportionately targeted by online violence (Gardiner 2018). Following the method of agreement principle (Mills et al 2010), I selected these two countries as objects of comparison to account for the role that press freedom context may play in shaping the working environments of journalists dealing with online violence.

For the first phase, I contacted representatives from organizations who publicly showcased their work on gendered online violence against journalists. The snowball method was also used in this phase to recruit additional participants. For the second phase, noting that certain characteristics (including digital presence, newsroom size, and ideological position) make some media organizations more likely to be targeted by online violence (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020), I compiled lists of media organizations fulfilling these criteria for both countries. Staff members (broken down by senior editors/mid-level editors/social media or community managers managers/staff reporters) were then identified by searching for keywords and handles on Twitter and LinkedIn. Potential participants were then contacted individually by Twitter Direct Message and/or email. I also included freelancers who publicly indicated that they had worked for the publications in question.

For this exploratory study, I utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary methodology in order to study how media workers experienced their working environments. Semi-structured interviews constitute a recognized method for understanding the lived experiences and life worlds of others (Lindlof and Taylor 2011) and allow for capturing a broader set of perceptions that may go beyond previous assumptions (Bryman 2012).

Interviews were conducted over Zoom or similar software, lasting an average of 1 hour, and took place between September-December 2020. Formal consent forms were shared with each potential participant. Certain participants also volunteered to check their own transcripts to ensure cultural and linguistic accuracy.

In the final sample, I included a total of 27 interviews: 12 in the first research phase and 15 in the second. For the first research phase, participants included staff at the OSCE, UNESCO, the International Press Institute, Reporters Without Borders, PEN America, ARTICLE19, OnlineSOS, as well as independent consultants and researchers working with newsrooms (including, but not limited to, UK and Indian organizations) on online violence issues. I also took observation notes from two online training sessions on online violence intended for newsroom editors, which along with three sets of manuals and guidelines produced by the same organizations were also included as data.

Among the second phase interviews, 7 participants were India-based and 8 were UK-based. In total, they represented two medium-sized digital newspapers (one India-based, one UK-based) and one large global

news agency operating in both countries. Job titles included staff reporters, community managers, editors, and freelancers who had worked for at least one of these media organizations. Their level of experience in journalism varied between 1 and 30 years. Around half were currently working as freelancers, though many juggled multiple roles at once, including shift work at news organizations.

Given the gendered focus of this paper, it is no surprise that the total sample overwhelmingly consisted of women (n = 23) and non-binary/genderfluid respondents (n = 2). Though I did not deliberately ask participants to disclose any additional identities that were not already public on their social media profiles, several participants did also self-report additional queer identities (n = 4), disabilities (n = 2), or belonging to religious minorities (n = 2) and/or marginalized caste groups (n = 1).

The highly sensitive and often traumatic content of the interviews meant that the anonymity of the participants had to be strongly protected. Participants often conveyed a very real and justified feeling of risk in disclosing details of their workplaces for fear of professional repercussions, particularly when criticizing their employers. For this reason, I chose to sacrifice a certain degree of specificity in the text in order to maximize the safety of my participants, referring to them in-text only by country and job title.

All interviews were transcribed, close-read multiple times, and imported into NVivo for coding, as were observation notes from webinar trainings and the full text from guideline documents. By utilizing thematic analysis, I aimed to identify patterns within and across data within the lived experiences of participants in terms of how they perceived organizational support (Braun and Clarke 2017). Using data from the first research phase, I began a process of open coding, inductively tagging data in reference to how participants identified common challenges when addressing online violence in newsrooms, comparing and making notes about their responses as well as the language used by them (Patton 2002). I then use this initial coding frame as the starting point for analyzing transcripts from the second research phase. After coding this data in the same way, I conducted interpretive analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) on this data to identify themes both in relation to previous literature and findings from the first phase. Three main themes were identified, forming the basis of my analysis.

Findings

Three main themes were identified as barriers to effectively address gendered online violence against journalists: stratified access to support resources, a culture of "toughing-it-out" within the journalistic profession, and a general sense of precarity within the industry that limits the extent to which journalists can control their own work.

Stratified access to support

Table 1

It quickly became clear that barriers to addressing online violence against journalists cannot be understood without considering the material conditions of a newsroom. Interventions identified by participants in the first phase as helpful for addressing online violence were all resource-intensive: additional staff are needed to handle reporting to law enforcement, provide psychological support, and implement technical security protocols (PEN America 2020, Chocarro et al 2020). With revenues in constant jeopardy, most owners and managers will be hesitant to spend such resources. Many of the NGO representatives and consultants who regularly interacted with media organizations reported that while many members of upper management expressed a willingness to expand their work on digital safety and improve support structures for their staff, they often perceived the prospect as a financial impossibility.

Journalists who worked for larger media organizations gave reference to legal teams, contacts at social media platforms, training sessions, and digital security tools as measures to prevent or take action against online violence. The infrastructure needed for addressing online violence seemed to require a level of resources that the smaller media companies could not hope to match. While resource scarcity was a highly present issue for both UK and Indian journalists, Indian journalists tended to emphasize the financial drain that press freedom crackdowns and government resistance represented, particularly costly lawsuits. These findings are in line with previous research that shows how inequality regimes affect which organizations that are more likely to develop higher levels of material resources to support their staff – often organizations with a history of being more closely aligned to "the establishment" (Wooten and Couloute 2017).

However, inequalities within each organization in terms of access to whatever resources did exist also became apparent. More senior staff were ready to speak of their contacts in the organization's legal team or within external support institutions, even within social media companies themselves. They knew how to name members of upper management with whom they could raise issues, and several used words like "responsive" or "very quick" in reference to their colleagues in charge of digital safety issues. If protocols or policies explicitly dealing with online violence or digital safety existed at the organization, they knew about and could comment on them.

By contrast, whatever formal or informal infrastructure existed for dealing with online violence tended to be more opaque for junior journalists. They also faced the additional barrier of "going up the hierarchy" whenever they wanted to raise a concern or report an incident, always having to consider how their boss might consider their complaint, even when facing serious safety issues. At the bottom of the hierarchy, freelancers were rarely given any information on the topic whatsoever, thus giving no indication of what kind of support they could expect if they faced online violence due to their work for a particular organization. One UK-based senior editor described his experiences raising various forms of concerns to

higher-ups and his overall view of the organizational system thusly: "I'm quite good at complaining in terms of pinning down the right person. To moan to them is quite easy. So it's quite transparent from where I'm sitting. If you're a freelancer, then it probably wouldn't be at all."

Tough-it-out culture

Table 2

Participants often discussed to the lack of newsroom responses to online violence in relation to an overall "tough-it-out" culture within the journalistic profession as a whole. Several participants evoked the gendered dimension of this "tough-it-out" culture, discussing how it normalizes the experiences of privileged men over other groups.

In line with findings from other recent studies (Holton et al 2021; Chen et al 2020), participants often described online violence as a normalized "part of the job" or "to be expected"; an unavoidable consequence of doing journalism, particularly as a woman. Many partly attributed this to journalist dependency on social media in their daily work, necessary for finding sources and building a personal brand. Informed by a general acknowledgment that covering certain topics carried more risk, many journalists also described online violence as the price to pay for "doing good journalism" that challenged societal power structures. This included covering topics related to marginalized groups (two frequent examples were trans people in the UK and Muslims in India).

This dynamic was most strongly evoked by Indian participants. One Indian freelancer expressed this as "honestly, the abuse against journalists in India has been going on for so long that a lot of journalists who are young, like me, who are just starting out with their careers, we think that simply that if the right-wing is abusing us, we're doing a good job." Engaging in independent journalism (and particularly criticizing the government directly or the Hindutva ideology more broadly) was perceived as carrying increasing risk. Many participants had either experienced or knew of cases of physical violence against journalists that had been preceded by online threats, which affected how they perceived online violence. One Indian journalist followed her description of threatening Twitter messages she had received with the following:

> Of course, in a place like India, it's worse because you really know you know, maybe you weren't killed today, but, yeah, you really did piss off a crazy person. You could absolutely end up in trouble. (Indian staff writer)

While this was distressing for many participants, many also described a general expectation to "toughen

up" or "become immune" to online threats. Participants in both UK and India often attributed this to a general competitive and individualistic culture within the journalistic profession. Several participants explicitly named this culture as gendered, where masculine-coded norms were seen as default expectations for all journalists. In particular, a norm of not appearing "emotional" or "weak" was commonly evoked by participants. Participants feared negative reprisals or even mockery on the part of their higher-ups if they expressed emotional distress over what they faced online. The same fear of appearing "weak" can be identified in the literature on workplace sexual harassment, which has detailed how women are stereotyped when reporting (Hart 2019). Using Acker's (2006) terminology, we can see the punishment of "weakness" as a method of control and compliance set to minimize questioning of existing gendered power structures in the organization.

Some representatives from advocacy organizations working on online violence issues also hesitated to emphasize the gendered aspect of online violence in their campaigning. These representatives expressed a concern that framing online violence as a "women's problem" risked playing into stereotypes of women as "weak" or "less capable" of dealing with online violence. This suggested the opposite cultural norm of a "strong" (masculine-coded) journalist who *is* capable of dealing with online violence on their own.

An overall view of the media industry as dominated by privileged men was a common theme in the interviews. Participants discussed gendered hierarchies extensively, particularly the fact that while women sometimes outnumbered men in the newsrooms they worked with, men were more likely to occupy senior positions – a pattern supported by numerous global surveys of newsroom gender parity (Robertson et al 2021). This affected the extent to which participants were willing to discuss online violence issues with their editors or other managers.

While specific factors regarding diversity in the newsroom differed between the UK and Indian cases, participants who identified as queer, belonged to religious or ethnic minorities, or were disabled often brought up the compounded impact of being targeted for these identities online. Managing how to present these identities in a professional environment or online public space to avoid harassment and hostility was often cited as taking up significant time and energy. At the same time, participants at all levels of the newsroom hierarchy would also often bring up examples of colleagues who "had it worse". In the UK case, one white participant would make such a reference to her colleagues of color, while in the Indian case a participant who identified as belonging to the Brahmin caste considered her Dalit colleague as being in a more vulnerable position.

In light of this context, most participants identified the lack of diversity within newsrooms as problematic. The fact that individuals who were likely to be affected or even aware of the particular online hostility that

targets marginalized groups are scarcely found among upper management in media organizations was commonly cited as a barrier to implementing effective support structures and policies. Participants often expressed frustration with the fact that even with media organizations that advertised themselves as "egalitarian" and "open" in their culture and editorial approach, social norms within the newsroom still made it difficult to initiate dialogue with upper management, in line with findings on the informal nature of mechanisms upholding inequality regimes (Acker 2006). Consultants and NGO representatives working with media managers also reported a general lack of awareness and commitment particularly among upper management. One UK-based digital safety consultant referred to the issue as "apathy trickling down."

The lack of diversity in media organizations was raised as significant not just for the creation of overall inequality regimes, but was also specifically referred to as a barrier for accessing effective social support for online violence or other expressions of discrimination, exclusion and violence. The importance of being able to share experiences of online violence (and sometimes offline threats) with peers who "get it" was underlined by many participants. It allowed participants to consider their experiences as part of wider patterns. Conversely, when upper management is dominated by groups that are less likely to be targeted for online violence, this understanding is unlikely to inform newsroom policies. More junior journalists spoke of their higher-ups as lacking the perspective they had on overall inequalities within the newsroom, echoing Acker's point that "visibility (of inequality) varies from the position of the beholder" (2006, 452).

Precarity

Table 3

While an overall sense of resource scarcity was often referred to as a significant limiting factor in addressing online violence of journalists, the working conditions and manager-employee relations were further complicated by economic interests and business models that favor maximum productivity and quantifiable engagement over journalist safety. Managing harassment requires time and labor on the part of entire newsrooms as well as individual journalists – time that many participants simply did not have at their disposal. Overwork was a common reality. This was vividly illustrated by the many participants who continued to work simultaneously as they partook in my interviews.

One key difference between staff journalists and freelancers was found in levels of access to social support. Despite being limited by demanding work schedules, staff journalists still expressed that they experienced the social structure of the newsroom as a helpful resource. In addition, stable employment offered access to any support mechanisms (such as legal and psychological support) that the organization had in place, from which freelancers were excluded. "You're your own legal team," as one UK freelancer described it.

Even in cases when structured legal and psychological support was lacking within the organization, being able to at least turn to your colleagues to discuss experiences of online violence was often reported as a vital coping tool. As freelancers do not have access to this environment, freelancer participants often referred to a sense of isolation as a factor that both exacerbated the emotional impact of online violence and complicated their engagement with and access to support.

What both freelancers and staff journalists had in common in their narratives was an overarching sense of precarity and lack of control over their own work. The knowledge that you may at any moment be out of a job or fail to earn new commissions weighed heavily on many participants, which informed their actions in trying to deal with online violence. This often led them to make decisions about their online presence or produce content that they knew would put them at risk for being targeted online, and also limited their capacity to bring up these concerns with editors.

An Indian former staff journalist, who had since decided to leave the profession, described an experience in which she was assigned to write an aggregation article for which she was targeted by threatening and distressing messages on Twitter for several months. While she herself did not feel that the article had much journalistic value, it was gaining high levels of social media engagement, making her editors unwilling to listen to her concerns:

> Participant: You know, they had a really good eye for what would work on the Internet. Ultimately, their job is to deliver traffic.
>
> Interviewer: But at the cost of your safety, basically?
>
> Participant: Yeah. One hundred percent. But like I mean, I'm sure they faced pressure because they have these goals, they have this idea that you have to meet this much traffic, you have to account for this much traffic every month or every few months. The pressure is coming from just the business model.

Another Indian junior editor participant described receiving a large amount of threatening and disturbing messages and mentions on Twitter, causing her to take time off work to psychologically recover, but that her editor's only reaction had been to praise the high social media engagement of the article. Particularly young freelancers in the UK highlighted that young women were often expected to "mine their trauma" in writing about highly personal experiences, as these types of articles generated high levels of engagement, but also rendered them more vulnerable.

Viewing these factors in combination, we can identify a common thread of how these structural vulnerabilities compound to make engaging in collective action against online violence difficult. Participants regretted how the bulk of available advice focuses on how individual journalists can manage their digital security, practice self-care, or alleviate the labor burden of moderating or responding to online violence. This is in line with previous studies that have identified online violence as a highly individualized issue within the media industry (Holton et al 2021, Chen et al 2020), similarly to how managing workplace harassment often falls on the individual (Minotte and Legerski 2019).

Discussion and conclusion

While we know that gendered online violence is often not taken seriously or addressed in a systematic manner by media organizations (Chen et al 2020, Holton et al 2021), the findings from this study offer deeper insights as to why media organizations often fail to adequately support their workers in this regard. I argue that the working environments of journalists constrain opportunities to address online violence through three identified mechanisms: stratifying access to support resources, maintaining gendered norms that punish raising concerns about online violence as "weakness", and entrenched precarity within the industry which forces journalists to engage in their digital working environments under unsafe conditions. These dynamics can be recognized as mechanisms of control and compliance that serve to maintain inequality regimes (Acker 2006) within the media industry. I further argue that the considerable parallels between online violence and other forms of "internal" workplace harassment means that we should not consider the two as separate phenomena, but rather expressions of the same structural forces.

The interviews in this study painted a picture of online violence as inextricable from a journalist's daily working context, in line with recent studies that have shown an increasing normalization of online violence into journalistic routines (Chen et al 2020; Holton et al 2021; Miller 2021). Journalists today are expected to put themselves at risk of online hostility by pressures arising from business models that prioritize quantifiable metrics and ad revenue over journalists' online and offline safety. At the same time, the "online violence system" (to borrow from Bergman's (2019) terminology) is fraught with barriers on multiple levels that make it difficult for journalists to bring up concerns or advocate for their own safety to upper management without fear of jeopardizing their jobs.

In both the UK and Indian cases, participants testified about experiencing many factors within their working environments that have already been identified as making it difficult to report other forms of gendered workplace harassment, including a lack of understanding of the problem among upper management (Charlesworth, McDonald, and Cerise 2011), a lack of trust that any effective action will be taken (McDonald 2012), and the fact that isolated workers with the lowest levels of work security (in this case, freelancers) remain the most vulnerable (Ollo López and Núñez 2017). In addition, the punishing

risk of appearing "weak" by complaining about online violence echoed North's (2009, 2016) findings that masculine-coded norms enable a general tolerance for sexual harassment in newsrooms. When women express emotion in the workplace, they are often labelled not only as "weak", but as "weak women" (Smith et al 2016), particularly in industries dominated by men, where norms of what passes as "professional" behavior are determined along stereotypically masculine characteristics (Bastalich et al 2007).

These findings evoke Acker's (2006) argument that gendered workplace harassment functions as a structural reinforcer of inequality regimes through a slew of formal and informal processes and practices within the workplace. These barriers within the newsroom are informed by the "enmeshment" of structures of marginalization (including, but not limited to, gender, race, and class) and economic pressures within the organization. Both factors were identified by participants as contributing to a media industry offering little support to journalists facing gendered online violence.

Addressing my second research question, the context of the overall press freedom environment did appear to affect how these barriers were perceived. The main difference between the UK and Indian cases was the intensity of the threat posed by online violence. The worsening press freedom context in India meant that online threats sometimes paled in comparison to the physical threats that many journalists faced daily, but also raised the stakes of such online threats, as they were acknowledged to be situated on a spectrum of violence both against women and against journalists. The resources of independent media organizations were also further constrained by government crackdowns, making it even more difficult to implement support resources for online violence or even provide for the basic material safety and well-being of their staff.

While the specifics of the demographic features that stratify newsrooms varied between the two countries,the way in which such stratifications and lack of representation among upper management affected opportunities for taking action against online violence were reported in remarkably similar ways. "Apathy trickling down" made it more difficult for journalists further down the hierarchy to ask for support for a problem that upper management were less likely to understand as significant.

Grounded in Acker's (2006) insistence that workplace gender inequalities cannot be divorced from the economic drivers of an organization, I also underline the importance of precarity within the narratives of my participants. Journalists did not have steady ground to stand on when raising safety concerns, asking for support resources, or simply demanding more control over their own publications. I also wish to highlight how many participants cited the threat of online and offline (gendered) harassment and violence as a factor that in itself created a sense of danger and instability in media work. This falls in line with Matthews and Onyemaobi's (2019) and Chadha and Steiner's (2022) assertions that threats of violence and discrimination in themselves constituted precarious conditions among journalists, particularly in adverse press freedom environments.

Based on the above findings, I argue that online violence both reinforces and is reinforced by inequality regimes within the media sector. If we consider the journalistic identity a site of oppression that intersects with other identities (Miller 2021) to render journalists as targets for mob censorship (Waisbord 2020), then we must also consider how the journalistic (digital) working environment reproduces these vulnerabilities. A precarious, fragmented and individualized media industry (Beck-Gernsheim 2012; Cohen 2018; Holton et al 2021) lacks both capacity and incentive to effectively respond to gendered online violence as a serious challenge to press freedom.

My exploratory research design means that these findings cannot be broadly generalized, but rather point to possible future research avenues. Firstly, I join previous calls for a greater focus on intersectional analysis in the field of online violence research (Hackworth 2018; Miller 2021). Gender has so far been the axis of marginalization that most studies have focused on (Miller 2021). While my participants agreed that misogyny and gender-based violence and discrimination within organizations were highly significant in shaping experiences of online violence, these rarely functioned in isolation. Intersectionality thus remains a vital tool both for studying how online violence in itself is experienced as well as how organizations are set up to address it. There is a particular lack of research that focus specifically on how race, disability, and/or queer identities affects experiences of online violence.

Noting that many of my participants emphasized the importance of social support and solidarity structures in dealing with online violence, more research is also needed on how these structures may help to build resilience and resistance among media workers. As Acker (2006) emphasizes, the fact that inequality regimes are structural does not mean that workers must passively accept them. Studying forms of collective resistance against online violence in a variety of contexts may provide key insights into such opportunities for addressing online violence.

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