

## **“You can Run, but You Cannot Hide!” Mapping Journalists’ Experiences With Hostility in Personal, Organizational, and Professional Domains**

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### **Abstract**

Our study describes how hostility reaches journalists and their reactions to the experiences. Semi-structured interviews with 18 Estonian journalists were conducted in 2021 from June to December. We divided journalists’ experiences into personal, professional, and organizational domains. One key observation is that journalists cannot avoid work-related hostility, even when off-duty. In addition, as one journalist receives hostility in a myriad of ways, there is a necessity for a multilevel approach when teaching about coping with or preventing unnecessary hostility from reaching journalists. Our mapping can be used when preparing students for occupational hazards or developing journalism curricula.

### **Keywords**

journalism, journalists, training, journalism and mass communication education, trauma

Attacks against journalists and the hostility they receive have now earned a lot of researchers' attention, and reasonably so, as reports on attacks are significantly increasing in recent years (UNESCO, 2021). Nowadays, researchers have dived into a more specific context and looked into how it is to work as a journalist during a pandemic (e.g., Hoak, 2021), the attacks journalists receive and experience, and the consequences and influence on society (Larsen et al., 2021; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016).

Much research focuses on describing the nature of hostility; however, studies have paid little attention to (systemizing) how hostility reaches journalists. It would provide more knowledge for discussing how to protect journalists or how journalists can protect themselves—both of which are complex topics because of the nature of the job (see Martin & Murrell, 2020; Ogunyemi & Akanuwe, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

We, as journalism educators, often struggle with explaining in a systemized manner the hostility that reaches journalists and probable strategies for dealing with it. Our study aims to fill this gap. In addition, the article provides a helping hand in journalism training when discussing professional hazards and analyzing the possibilities to find personal strategies to prevent unnecessary stress and trauma or how to cope with them.

Following the example of other researchers (Mendes, 2022; Miller, 2021), we use the word “hostility” in this study as a cover term wherever needed for describing different kinds of verbal harassment, abusive communication, or threats to avoid adding to the terminological confusion around the word harassment. We include in our studies both offline and online experiences with hostility.

### *Context*

At the center of this study is Estonia, a country considered peaceful for journalists to work in (the fourth position in the Press Freedom Index—Reporters Without Borders, 2022b). Even so, research has brought out severe issues with hostility (death threats, stalking, receiving ropes for hanging oneself, etc.) among Estonian journalists (Ivask, 2020; Riives et al., 2021). Journalists are aggressively approached at protests, threatened, and forced to leave (Eesmaa & Mooste, 2022). Journalists have tried to fight against hostility but failed on a regulatory basis and are being bullied about it (e.g., Joonas, 2021). As we face more and more situations where journalists are defenseless, journalists need to have coping and prevention strategies.

## **Literature Overview**

### *Hostility Against Journalists and Their Reactions*

The severest cases of attacks and hostility against journalists include journalists disappearing, being murdered, being held hostage, or being imprisoned. At the time of writing this article, there were 537 journalists imprisoned and 56 murdered (Reporters Without Borders, 2022a). In addition, attacks and harassment against journalists covering protests have risen (UNESCO, 2020).

Female journalists report experiencing a worrisome amount of hostility, attacks, and threats (Posetti et al., 2022). Although there is a stigma surrounding men admitting to being in dangerous situations and not reporting it (Riives et al., 2021; Stahel & Schoen, 2020), evidence indicates male journalists face similar issues (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). Although most journalists have received

hostility via the internet (Lewis et al., 2020), a higher number of online hostility is directed at women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ community members (Chen et al., 2020; Waisbord, 2020).

How does hostility reach journalists? Audience members often send hostility by leaving abusive comments about the author on stories (Coe et al., 2014) or an outlet's social media (Su et al., 2018), journalists suffer from doxing, hacking, and unwanted exposure online (Douglas, 2016). Journalists react to such hostility by self-preservation methods, such as being less active on social media, turning off messaging, or avoiding reading comments (Holton et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2020).

The reactions to hostility also include offline coping or prevention strategies. For example, journalists seek social support (discussions with senior colleagues, friends, and family), visit places that are perceived to be safe, avoid areas with previous safety concerns, self-censor (avoid controversial sources and issues that will expose journalists to unwanted danger), and even consider leaving journalism (Chinweobo-Onuoha et al., 2022; Ivask et al., 2017; Larsen et al., 2021; Miller, 2021). Some strategies include using pseudonyms for work and personal life (Lewis et al., 2020). These are the individual-based ways of either coping with or preventing hostility.

#### *Journalists' Personal, Professional, and Organizational Domains*

Our division of domains is a modified version of how Shoemaker and Reese presented their hierarchy of influences model. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) put individuals in the middle, surrounded by routines, organizations, social institutions, and social systems. Unlike Shoemaker and Reese (1996), we zoomed in on the individual domain and divided it into professional and personal (Figure 1). We rely on the premise that workers have personal and professional space (work-life balance; Snyder et al., 2021). We need to recognize that borders between personal and professional domains are fragile or hardly exist (Lukan & Čehovin Zajc, 2022; Snyder et al., 2021). The boundaries have blurred even more with the rise in online possibilities (Paulussen, 2012).



Figure 1. Journalists' Three Domains. By authors.

The worker belongs to a meso-level system—an organization—with regulations, norms, and set goals. It is a place for demands, tasks, and resources to do one’s job (Ivask, 2018).

By this categorization, we also look at solutions from different perspectives. For example, experiences including the organizational domain should include the organization in the solution. Personal domain experiences put more responsibility on the individual to search for solutions. The professional domain includes both individuals and organizations in the solution.

We proposed two research questions.

Research Question 1: How does hostility reach journalists?

Research Question 2: How do journalists react to hostility?

**Method and Sample**

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with reporters working for the Estonian writing press (print, online, and converged newsrooms). Most journalists cover news beats and opinion-eds; some work for the investigative newsroom from time to time. Statistics Estonia (2021) data show 929 journalists working in Estonia; among them, there are more women (545) than men (384). We do not have more precise statistics for writing press journalists whom we are focusing on in this study.

We used purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling for recruiting: We created a sample of journalists who had experiences with hostility. After a couple of interviews, journalists added some respondents to our sample whom they knew had had experiences with hostility. We chose purposive sampling because the goal was to focus on particular characteristics of a population of interest, which would best enable us to answer research questions (Etikan et al., 2015). Snowball sampling was used to get more access to hard-to-reach populations (Parker et al., 2019) and to reduce the main disadvantage—the judgmental, subjective component of purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2015).

There are 11 female and seven male journalists in the sample. The experience varied from 2 years to more than 20. Most of the journalists (14 of 18) have experience in other newsrooms, not only the one they work for now. The ages of the journalists in the sample varied from 23 to 46.

Three researchers conducted interviews and followed the same research questions, plan, and interview guide. The interviews took place face-to-face or online (via Skype and Teams). Although there were differences in data gathering (online communication v face-to-face) and subtle differences in how the interview plan was followed, the data are comparable because the leading researcher systemized it and worked closely with two other researchers.

The interviews were carried out from June to December 2021. Interviews were transcribed and then we carried out within-case and cross-case thematic analysis, where we read through the data and compared the findings. Thematic analysis was used to search for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012) concerning our research questions. Analyzing and collecting the data were conducted according to the guidelines. All our respondents in this article are anonymous; we present them with codes (Table 1).

Table I. Respondents' Codes (C) and Media Work Experience (More or Less Than Five Years) (E).

C	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
E	>5	>5	<5	<5	>5	>5	>5	>5	>5	>5	>5	>5	<5	<5	>5	<5	<5	>5

## Findings

We divided journalists' experiences of how hostility reached them into three main domains (Figure 1): organizational, professional, and personal. It offers a more concrete way of analyzing the possible solutions with the students. When categorizing the hostility between organizational, professional, and personal domains, we paid attention to several features: first, at whom the hostility is aimed; second, who possesses the channel/means of communication; and third, who is in charge of the potential solution.

### *Journalists' Personal Domain*

According to journalists, it is the domain where they feel the most pressure and stress. It should be the first domain journalists start analyzing to find solutions. We found that not only work (Lukan & Čehovin Zajc, 2022; Snyder et al., 2021) but also hostility toward journalists follows them home, reaching them outside of official work time, on weekends or even holidays, primarily because journalists receive hostility directly via their personal communication means.

The results lead back to Waisbord (2020) and Lewis et al. (2020), other researchers who have claimed that online is where journalists receive the most hostility and threats. Our respondents said hostility could reach them directly on social media when someone has tagged them on someone's wall or in the comments of their own stories. One less experienced male journalist said that it is challenging as information communications technology opportunities allow being online 24/7, so they constantly have access to e-mails, comment sections, and social media, where the most hostility reaches them:

Even when you are just browsing your social media, you might find hostility aimed at you. That is life. (M6)

Social media accounts are also connected to another "new" form of hostility that starts with new-age online celebrities in Estonia: influencers and social media stars. If journalism covers their misdoings, influencers can urge their followers in an Instagram story or a YouTube video to send hostility toward the journalist. They call their followers to action either explicitly or implicitly. Less experienced female journalists had more problems with influencers than male colleagues, who were mainly bothered by the audience or source's hostile comments on social media or outlet comment sections.

Influencers can ask their followers for personal information about a journalist, then disseminate it on their platform and call followers to repeat the practice. Both followers and influencers create hostile posts where they tag the journalist and send them hostility via messaging on social media.

Journalists did not know how to solve the situation. They said that even when they delete their accounts on social media, close ones (friends, family, and relatives) play a significant role. For example, one way is to spread willingly or unwillingly personal information about the journalist to the public. In some cases, journalists' close ones can also become a source of hostility due to being a follower of the influencer:

I was at my grandfather's funeral when the influencer published their story about me. I even fought with my relatives at the funeral about my article about [that influencer], as they are the influencer's followers and supporters. That is when I knew how my personal information got out there. (F9)

Hostility can also reach journalists in a forward manner in the personal domain. For example, someone else—family members or friends—reads the comments, gets emotional, and then turns to

the journalist with the found information. They can also accidentally lead the journalist to a source of hostility that the journalist could have avoided and emphasize the negative.

Not only do close ones sometimes give out information about the journalist, but they are also approached to scare both female and male journalists. Some journalists revealed that sources and followers have turned to their family members, friends, and close ones and threatened or shared displeasure with the journalist. It usually occurs on social media or via e-mails and calls on close ones' phones:

They contacted my mother and talked negatively about me to her. What is scary is that they had to first search for her name, her phone number. . . they had to take time to do so. (F7)

Journalists also said that these cases are unavoidable, you cannot shut them down. They reported these things to the newsroom management and HR. The most help is provided by the police, who talk to the person who approached the family member and, if necessary, warn them. Nevertheless, if the hostility does not contain a direct threat, the police cannot do much, which makes female journalists feel incredibly powerless.

One way of avoiding the hostility was to follow the lead of older, more experienced journalists who do not possess accounts on social media. The other was not to use personal social media for work, and the third was to set up social media so that it does not let you be tagged, contacted by strangers, and so forth.

As a precautionary action, some journalists have changed their social media strategy: They have set their accounts and friends lists to private, do not post any photos of their family members, and try to make any connection to relatives untraceable. This kind of strategy was brought out mainly by male journalists (especially those who work as investigative journalists) who emphasize the need to keep their families safe. It somewhat goes together with what other researchers (Chinweobo-Onuoha et al., 2022; Miller, 2021) have claimed.

There are also anti-journalist groups. In those groups, people mobilize to send hostility toward the journalist. One less experienced female journalist described how someone in the group had shared photos from their adolescent period, some of which the journalist did not even know existed. The members sometimes use and disseminate photos from journalists' Instagram/Facebook pages, which are meant for personal use and are private. The journalist suggested she was hacked, or some friends or family disliked them:

“My Instagram is not public; there are selected people who can see my content. Somehow, the pictures from that account are still used in other public groups. How?” (F6).

One journalist also said they started reporting one of these groups with friends and colleagues to get it taken down by Facebook. However, these groups can move from Facebook to other platforms (Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.) that are out of reach, which is why including a lawyer and even newsroom's IT specialists to solve it is necessary as the instigator of the group can be tracked down and prosecuted.

### *Journalists' Professional Domain*

Professionally, hostility travels mostly directly from the source of hostility to journalists. For example, sources and audience members contact the journalist via work telephone or e-mail. As journalists are usually alone in that communication, it is their choice if they want to share the experience.

Less experienced journalists mentioned that it bothered them that experienced journalists tend to normalize their experience or laugh at it. Some more experienced respondents admitted doing it, naming it a standard coping mechanism in the newsroom (repeating Larsen et al., 2021 results):

“It is quite usual that we receive e-mails full of threats and hostility; it is a tendency around here to laugh at them.” (F6)

However, discussing the situation with colleagues or seeking social support (Chinweobo-Onuoha et al., 2022) does not serve as a working solution when the colleagues diminish the experience. Overall, journalists reported lacking prevention mechanisms in this domain, especially as journalists often receive hostility directly and cannot avoid it in any way. It also emphasizes needing coping methods to overcome some of the issues:

“You have to read e-mails, yes? Yes. You have to answer the phone, yes? Yes.” (M7)

The subsequent cases illustrate the journalist’s need to clearly understand the newsroom’s role in supporting, helping, and protecting them. First, journalists receive face-to-face verbal hostility when working, for example, at protests, at the crime scene, or contacting an aggressive source, as pointed out by respondents F4, M5, and F8. In Estonia, journalists are not yet physically attacked (Reporters Without Borders, 2022b) but are often verbally assaulted.

Second, there are cases in Estonia where journalists individually have been sued for their stories in a newspaper. They have been contacted directly, not via the organizational domain. In this case, they have to represent themselves in court, and recent experiences show that journalists can be found guilty separate from the newsroom, and they must pay a fine from their own pockets (Pärli, 2019; Vedler, 2022).

In these two cases, journalists struggled with finding how to cope or how to solve them. Both means of hostility are unavoidable and bring out the need for the newsroom to have transparent support mechanisms. In addition, there were cases when colleagues were verbally hostile toward mainly female journalists: face-to-face, via e-mail, or even on social media. In some cases, colleagues went to the editor-in-chief or managing editor to complain about a journalist “being young, stupid and inexperienced, therefore, not understanding the topic” (F9), so the hostility reached journalists via the managing editors. Usually, the topic the journalists covered was polarizing, like vaccines, alternative medicine or the environment. Female journalists who mainly reported these incidents were disappointed in the editor-in-chief, who did not stand up for them and encouraged an ill working environment.

### *Organizational Domain*

Journalists said that if they were looking for hostility aimed at them, they would first go to their stories’ comment section or the outlet’s social media. Although, in this case, the source of hostility does not lie in the organization, the organization provides a way to send hostility toward the journalist. Therefore, the respondents considered comment sections and outlet social media to belong to the organizational domain. Especially as only the organization can close the sections, post the stories and moderate the comments.

Most respondents said they do not necessarily read or search for the comments anymore, either on social media or in outlets’ comment sections; predominantly female journalists were reluctant to do so. It repeats Ivask (2020), Miller and Lewis (2022), and Holton et al. (2021) results:

“Even if you are not attacked or insulted, there is a lack of sensible discussion.” (F10).

Our respondents brought out a novel prevention strategy: They chose to close the comments section. Nevertheless, the newsroom management does not approve of closing them because they are supposed to be fora for the people's uncensored thoughts. There must be a strong argument behind closing the comments section and the fact that journalists want to avoid hostility is not it.

Sometimes the managing editor also offered the organization's legal team to take action against a hostile comment; however, communication was scarce, and journalists did not receive information if anything was done to protect them:

"The managing editor offered that our lawyer will take care of it. I do not know if it was the result of our lawyer's actions or the person took it down themselves, or it was reported and taken down." (F9)

If hostility reaching journalists via the comment section is somewhat preventable, then one unavoidable form of hostility is litigation, which journalists see as a measure for silencing them. Respondents brought it out as an important topic as it is becoming a trend to sue journalists or the media organization.

We put the litigation to the organizational domain because sources predominantly sue the newsroom/media organization, not the individual journalist who is the story's author. Information about it reaches journalists via an e-mail from the HR department or editor-in-chief, who can also approach journalists in the newsroom. If the journalist wants to be included in the information flow about the lawsuit, they must let the editor-in-chief and HR department know; otherwise, they are left out and are "in complete darkness" (M7), although it is their story that is in the center of the lawsuit.

For journalists, receiving the news of litigation is not the primary problem; what causes anxiety is the lack of organizational support when the information is being forwarded to them. In these two following cases, journalists were the story's authors; however, the media organization was sued:

"I know that the management and editors-in-chief are extremely fearful of litigation, partly because journalism has lost some significant court cases. The fear of the management also paralyses the journalist. Therefore, I would say that the best way to put a gag on journalism and journalists is to threaten to sue." (F2)

"The court case is the first thing I think about when I wake up. It takes a lot of time, weeks, even years, until the legal system settles anything, so the case travels with you everywhere, all the time. It is burdensome; it is brutal." (F1)

Experienced journalists approached the litigation more calmly than less experienced journalists. Especially, there was a lack of understanding of what it means for the less experienced journalists career-wise when the media organization is sued for a story they wrote.

In sum, female journalists reported more versatile ways of how hostility reaches them, which goes together with studies on the topic (Posetti et al., 2022). Therefore, they were also more critical and dissatisfied with the lack of supportive and safety measures offered by the newsroom. Outlook on hostility often differs between experienced and less experienced journalists, partly because older journalists often do not have social media accounts or presents.

## **Conclusive Discussion**

In this article, we explored journalists' experiences with hostility, mapping out what they face, where they are most vulnerable, and how they react to their experiences. We divided the experiences into



three domains regarding how hostility reached journalists. By doing so, we encourage in-depth discussions on the roles of journalists and organizations in protecting journalists.

The results and their categorization show the complexity of how hostility reaches journalists (Figure 2). It also sheds light on why it is challenging to protect journalists. What is more, our study shows that one journalist usually faces hostility in a myriad of ways, not only one. Figure 2 summarizes who is hostile toward journalists and what means they use to send journalists hostility.

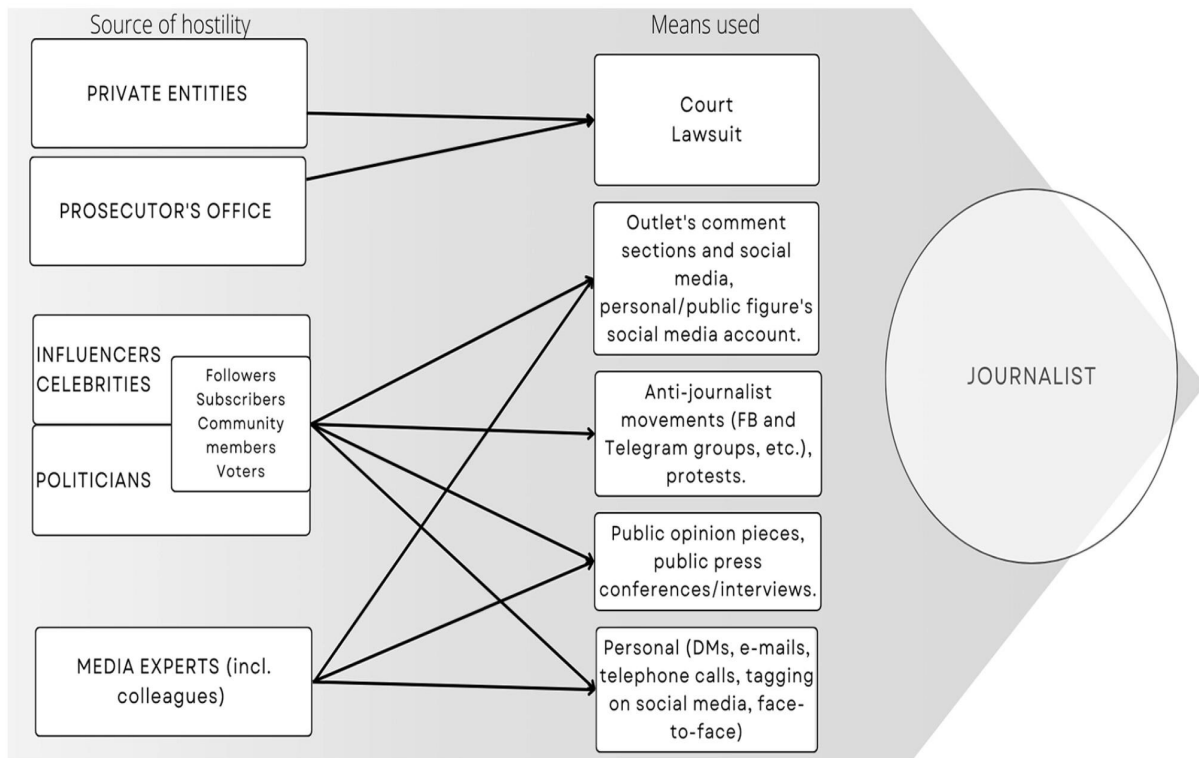


Figure 2. The Source and the Means of Sending Hostility. By authors.

Drawing from the results, we put together points journalism educators can pay attention to in their training or when developing curricula. Journalists:

- Need to know the principles and rights of defending their (anonymous) sources, as there is always the possibility of litigation.
- Need to know how the responsibility divides between them and the newsroom when the story brings on a lot of hostility or when the journalist is sued. Journalists must know how to negotiate with the newsroom on the topic of responsibility before publishing a large-scale story where the journalist is an author.
- Need to know about the practices of writing “bulletproof” stories that cannot be used to sue. It also needs room for discussion with the students, as this practice is often driven by fear of litigation.
- Require knowledge about how social media settings work, also, what kind of “keyholes” social media have. For example, how people can still reach your private page. This kind of training could be provided by both the workplace and the journalism curriculum.
- Need to know whom they can turn to with different kinds of problems. They need to familiarize themselves with the possibilities in the newsroom and media organization.
- Need to know how to analyze disagreements, the principles of assertiveness, and solving the conflict in a workplace.

- Need to recognize constructive criticism and learn from it.

One key observation is that journalists cannot avoid work-related hostility, even when off-duty. Instead of encouraging future journalists to admit that receiving hostility is part of the job and they should get used to it, we hope to encourage discussions on recognizing how unnecessary hostility reaches them and what are the possible prevention or coping measures. It is also clear that not all hostility is preventable, so journalists need coping strategies. Most of all, journalists need tools to recognize the seriousness of hostility they receive. As warned by other researchers, verbal hostility can turn to physical altercations and assaults, it is necessary to know how to keep oneself safe.

Although there is significant research on female journalists receiving more hostility and threats than their male colleagues, we cannot draw complete gender-based conclusions from the number of respondents and experiences in our study, primarily because of the recruiting method. We approached people with experiences with hostility and attacks.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Operational Program Research, Development and Education—Project “Postdoc2MUNI” (No. CZ.02.2.69/0.0/0.0/18\_053/0016952).

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