

'A modern-day equivalent of the Wild West': preparing journalism students to be safe online

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Abstract

Journalists are increasingly becoming the target of online abuse; the backlash over the death of TV presenter Caroline Flack and coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests are just two recent examples. Yorkshire Evening Post editor Laura Collins has highlighted how female journalists face the brunt of this abuse, describing social media as 'a modern-day equivalent of the Wild West'. The fact that journalists are exposed to this kind of attack is becoming an increasing focus; but how are we – as educators – to prepare our journalism students for entering this world? What guidance should we be giving them – to respond or not to respond, to block or not to block? And at what point should they report their experience via more formal channels? The authors of this paper set out to identify strategies and tools for students to help protect themselves and remain resilient in the face of online abuse. Through qualitative interviews, we asked how practising journalists are coping with social media attacks, and what steps they and their employers are taking to protect and support them. The result is a set of guidelines offering practical and emotional advice from journalists to directly inform journalism educators and their students.

Introduction

Online abuse has today become something of a norm for many in the public eye – whether for members of the royal family (Davies 2019, The Royal Household ND), footballers (Rashford 2021) or pop stars (Hyun Young Li & Sangmi Cha 2019).

Holton & Molyneux (2017) note that traditionally, journalists had not had to develop a direct audience-facing identity, with most working in relative anonymity. But with a changing economic environment in journalism and the move to digital and online, they report a shift towards individual and organisational

branding by journalists. Brems et al (2017) also highlight the demand for personal branding amongst journalists, particularly on Twitter, and this is reinforced by Wolfe (2019) who says that journalists are increasingly being required to have an online presence and to interact with their audiences. 'This is identified by media owners as a way of engaging more "eyeballs" and potentially driving up profits.' (ibid p.11).

As journalists have been forced more into the public eye, so too have they become more a target of abuse online (Costa-Kostritsky 2019; Chen et al 2018; NUJ 2020; Amnesty International 2018) - often simply for doing their job reporting on events. The backlash against the media after the death of TV presenter Caroline Flack was just one example, with publisher Reach plc offering guidance to its reporters as a result (Mayhew 2020). But Brexit, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter have all been the backdrop for attacks on journalists as well. According to Samantha Harman, Newsquest Oxfordshire editor, 'it reached a boiling point this year [2020] during coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement, with reporters having to deal with abhorrent, disgusting and racist comments on stories.' (Behind Local News 2020).

The issue has increasingly become the focus of academic research (for example Gardiner 2018, Ferrier 2018, Chen et al 2020) – but how are we, as journalism educators, to prepare our journalism students for entering this world? Online safety for journalists is something that is increasingly required within our training (Employer A ND, Employer B ND), but how exactly should we be advising our students? As a journalism lecturer and as a Masters graduate now working in the frontline as a reporter, the researchers felt we had a valuable joint perspective to bring in the search for some answers to these questions.

Aims and Methodology

Our aim, therefore, was to take the research that has been done into the fact of the abuse itself a step further to:

Explore how journalists and employers are responding to it

Identify some practical help that could be offered to trainee journalists

Create a shared resource of guidance and tools for supporting students going into digital journalism.

Using qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews were planned with a number of journalists and editors. Brinkmann & Kvale (2018) define qualitative research as aiming to understand, describe and sometimes explain by analysing people's experiences - including professional practices; interviews allow the subjects to convey their situation from their own perspective and in their own words. Specific questions were drafted aimed at generating the kind of 'rich, thick description' that Bearman highlights (2019 p.4). These were used for every interviewee for reasons of consistency but were added to as appropriate during the interviews; using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions enables a focus on personal experience and seeks to build rapport (King & Horrocks 2010). 'The research interview is an interview [sic] where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action [sic] between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018 p. 2).

In line with the aims of the research, a mix of journalists and editors was required for the interviews. The following list of set questions was used as a starting point for each interviewee:

For journalists:

- What has been your personal experience of online abuse?
- What impact did the abuse have on you?
- How did you respond to this?
- What strategies do you feel were most helpful for you?
- What support or guidance did you get from your employer?
- What advice and tips do you have for students or trainee journalists?
- For editors:
- What has been your experience of online abuse in your journalism team?
- What impact has this had on you/them, both personally and professionally?
- What support or guidance do you offer your journalists?
- What advice and tips do you have for students or trainee journalists?
- Subjects were initially identified using the following criteria:

Journalists and editors who had publicly written about either themselves or their employees being the target of abuse.

Journalists and editors from a range of media platforms to ensure experiences across the industry were reflected – covering online, newspapers and broadcasters.

We wanted to ensure that participants from the BAME communities were included in order to give as diverse a range of experience as possible.

Whilst research shows women to be the main target of online abuse (Sharman 2020a, Chen et al 2018), we wanted to open it up to male journalists as well because the focus of the research was not on the nature of the abuse itself, but on strategies for dealing with it.

We also felt it important to interview Hannah Storm, director and CEO of the Ethical Journalism Network. Storm has published her own findings and guidance on this topic (Storm 2019) and is able to provide a national and international overview as a campaigner and researcher with expertise in this area.

Subjects were then approached initially by email, clearly setting out the parameters of the research project and how the data would be used. Those subjects who responded were asked to provide their consent as to whether they wished to remain anonymous or could be identified publicly, and also whether audio extracts from the interviews could be used at any stage. For the BBC, the researchers were referred to the press office who managed the initial approach, but respondents were then emailed directly, and consent processes fully observed.

The following group of 13 journalists and editors agreed to be interviewed. The majority of the respondents worked in regional journalism, and we believe this is reflective of the fact that local journalists are expected to engage more closely with their communities on social media as part of their job (Smith 2017, Reid 2014) – for example, through Facebook Lives. The sample spans journalists at different stages of their careers from more recently qualified reporters through to experienced editors, providing a range of perspectives on the issue.

Hannah Storm	Ethical Journalism Network director & CEO
Samantha Harman	<i>Oxford Mail</i> group editor (Newsquest)
Jenna Thompson	<i>Hull Live</i> digital editor (Reach plc)
Laura Collins	<i>Yorkshire Evening Post</i> editor (JPI Media)
Jess Rudkin	BBC Radio Bristol editor
Mellissa Dzinzi	Reporter at <i>Leeds Live</i>
Conor Gogarty	Chief reporter at <i>Bristol Post/Bristol Live</i>
Katie Ridley	Journalist at ITV Anglia and formerly <i>Huntingdon Post</i>
Anonymous	Female broadcast journalist
Kristian Johnson	Investigative reporter at <i>Leeds Live</i>
Anonymous	Male reporter at a daily newspaper
Susie Beever	Senior reporter at <i>The Yorkshire Post</i>
Emma Britton	BBC Radio Bristol breakfast presenter

Interviews were conducted using video technology; given the personal nature of some of the online abuse, we wanted to adopt a personal approach to reassure participants and set them at ease.

Literature review

The amount of abuse against journalists

The growing amount of abuse against journalists has begun to be well documented in recent years. Around half of journalists (51%) surveyed by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ 2020) said they experienced it at some point in the previous year. 78% said abuse and harassment had become normalised and seen as part of the job. Four out of five UK regional journalists say the problem has got ‘significantly worse’ since they began their careers (Behind Local News 2020). A large majority of respondents to this survey of local journalists said they encountered general abuse online every day, with 40% spending more than an hour

each week reading and dealing with it.

*‘Examples from this week alone would be: “bottom-feeder”, “bloodthirsty journalist”, “total piece of sh*t”, “f***ing c**t”, “so-called journalist, so-called human”, “scum”, “dirty scum”, “leech”.’ (Behind Local News 2020).*

For its report on online abuse against women, UNESCO and the International Center for Journalism surveyed 714 women journalists across 113 countries in what it describes as the most comprehensive global survey of its kind (Posetti 2020). Nearly three in four women respondents (73%) said they had experienced online violence. This is reinforced by Index on Censorship whose Mapping Media Freedom report reviewed 162 incidents involving investigative journalists of both sexes from 35 countries between 2014 and 2018 (Costa-Kostritsky 2019). The report found journalists were facing an ‘onslaught’ of online abuse – but noted that this was likely to be just ‘the tip of the iceberg’ as journalists do not report all the harassment they receive on social media because ‘they get used to it and end up seeing it as being part of the job’ (ibid).

The nature of the abuse

There is evidence that women journalists are more likely to be the target of abuse than men. A Demos report in 2014 (Demos 2014) for example found that female journalists and TV news presenters received roughly three times as much abuse as their male counterparts. Yorkshire Evening Post editor Laura Collins has highlighted how female journalists face the brunt of this abuse, describing social media as ‘a modern-day equivalent of the Wild West’ (Sharman 2020a). A survey of 597 women journalists and media workers by the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) and Troll-Busters.com in 2018 found that nearly 2 out of 3 respondents said they had been threatened or harassed online at least once (Ferrier 2018). They also reported that online attacks had become more visible and coordinated in the five years up to 2018.

The abuse is more likely to be personal in nature when aimed at women; the US journalist Alison Bethel McKenzie (OSCE 2016) notes that threats and harassment against women often take the form of personal attacks focusing on the woman’s character or body parts (p.22). The British journalist Caroline Criado Perez has written powerfully in the same OSCE report on the highly sexualised attacks she endured online and how the language was often about silencing her in particularly horrific ways including rape threats (pp.12-14). A lot of the language used against women journalists is indeed highly sexualised. Amnesty International has labelled Twitter a ‘toxic place for women’ (2018b), saying online threats can also include privacy violations such as doxing or sharing sexual or intimate images of a woman without her consent. Amnesty International (2018b) quotes Dunja Mijatović, former Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media, as saying that female journalists and bloggers are being ‘inundated’ with threats of murder, rape, physical violence and graphic imagery.

‘Male journalists are also targeted with online abuse, however, the severity, in terms of both sheer amount and content of abuse, including sexist and misogynistic vitriol, is much more extreme for female journalists.’ (ibid chapter 2)

Chen et al (2018) conducted research with 75 female journalists working internationally and who were expected to engage with their audience online as a requirement of their job. These women reported that they frequently faced comments threatening them based on their gender or sexuality. One respondent is quoted as saying:

‘Sex is used to intimidate us. Rape is used to frighten, intimidate, and stop us ... from doing our work, but at a deeper level it is actually about stopping us from having opinions, showing any semblance of independence.’ (Chen et al 2018 p.890).

The abuse against journalists, then, is gender-based but research shows it is also racially motivated with religion and sexual identity playing a part as well. The Guardian commissioned research into the 70 million comments left on its site between 2006 and 2016. This revealed that of the 10 regular writers to receive the most abuse, eight were women and the two men were black (Gardiner 2018). Of the eight women in the ‘top 10’, four were non-white, one was Muslim and one Jewish. And of the 10 writers, three were gay. Whilst the research focused on gender, ‘both writers and moderators observe that ethnic and religious minorities, and LGBT people also appear to experience a disproportionate amount of abuse.’ (Gardiner et al 2016). These findings are reinforced by Amnesty’s Toxic Twitter report which highlights the ‘intersectional nature’ of abuse on the platform, targeting women from ethnic or religious minorities, LGBTQ women and women with disabilities (Amnesty International 2018b Chapter 1), reinforcing Storm’s point that it is the diverse

voices of our media that are under attack (2019).

As this literature review shows, much of the abuse is sexualised, abusive, racial and misogynistic but at its worst, journalists' lives can be threatened. Amy Fenton, chief reporter for the Mail, Barrow's daily newspaper in Cumbria, was forced into hiding after threats to her life and that of her five-year-old daughter following her reporting of a court case (Pidd 2020). Stephanie Finnegan, the court reporter for *Yorkshire Live* had a similar experience after she was targeted with rape and death threats by supporters of the far-right leader, Tommy Robinson, in the wake of her coverage of his contempt of court case (Sharman 2018).

The impact of the abuse

Journalists who experience this kind of abuse may be badly affected in terms of their emotional and physical health. The survey carried out by Newsquest Oxfordshire editor Samantha Harman (Behind Local News 2020) revealed that journalists had been diagnosed with anxiety and depression, been forced to move home and had even left the profession. The IWMF and Trollbusters.com survey found that female journalists could suffer from 'emotional stress and long-term psychological trauma' because of online abuse (Ferrier 2018 p.35). In the most serious cases, journalists have contemplated suicide (Behind Local News 2020).

But the impact of the abuse also affects journalists professionally. Ferrier (2018) reports that 40% of women journalists had avoided reporting on a story because of fear of online harassment. A study by the Council of Europe in 2017 and involving 940 journalists shows that in the face of harassment, 31% of the journalists toned down coverage of certain stories, 15% dropped stories and 23% stopped covering certain stories (Council of Europe 2017). This is echoed in the findings of a global survey by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) which found that 30% responded to online violence by self-censoring on social media (Posetti 2020). Chen et al (2018) highlight the kind of strategies journalists have developed for dealing with targeted abuse, including limiting what they post online and changing stories they report on. The OSCE calls for a recognition that 'threats and other forms of online abuse of female journalists and media actors is a direct attack on freedom of expression and freedom of the media' (OSCE 2016 p.6). Both Ferrier (2018) and Amnesty International (2018b) agree that the aim is to silence women and create a hostile environment.

The beginnings of action

As the spotlight has been increasingly shone on the issue of abuse against journalists, action has started to be taken to look at how this can be dealt with – both in terms of employers, social media platforms, legislation and journalists themselves. Halifax MP Holly Lynch spoke in parliament to call for the publication of the promised Online Harms Bill, describing trolling and online abuse as 'a public health ticking timebomb' (Beever 2020). The Dart Center has assembled an excellent range of resources (Slaughter & Newman 2020), including recommendations from Trollbusters (Ferrier 2018) – for example, the need to document any threats using screenshots. The UK Society of Editors chose online abuse as its theme for its virtual conference in 2020 (Sharman 2020b), and publishers are starting to work with each other on common approaches (Behind Local News 2020). In the wake of the growing spotlight on the issue, the government has published its first National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2021). It includes training for police forces and journalists, and a number of pledges by broadcasters, publishers and social media companies to address the issue. Under the forthcoming Online Safety Bill, online platforms will be required to protect users and enforce their terms and conditions or face sanctions - including fines of up to 10 per cent of their annual turnover or having their services blocked.

Progress, then, has begun. But as Chen et al (2018) note:

'Our research demonstrated quite strongly that journalism schools and media outlets must pay more attention to this issue because the women in our sample overwhelmingly wanted more training to handle harassment and for their news organizations to protect them from abuse. To answer their request, student journalists should be trained how to handle the online harassment that comes with the job.' (p.891)

This reinforced our belief that a resource aimed at journalism educators is badly needed.

Findings

What should journalism students be prepared for?

To establish what journalism students should be prepared for when they enter the industry, we asked the participants to explain the nature of the online abuse they had faced in their careers.

The abuse ranged from scathing criticism of their journalistic credibility to death and rape threats, where police action was taken. The participants widely agreed with the findings of the Behind Local News survey (2020) which show abuse against regional journalists has become ‘more commonplace’ and ‘particularly more vile’ [Int 9] in recent years. One editor had ‘lost count’ of the number of times she had been threatened, abused or trolled [Int 1]. She said: ‘When I started [in 2011] it was A) not as bad as it is now and B) not spoken about as much’. Several journalists mentioned a growing hostility against the mainstream media and in particular the BBC, which ‘filters down’ to local reporters who bear the brunt of the abuse [Int 9]. This echoes findings in the NUJ Safety Survey (2020) where 94% of respondents said the current polarisation of debate in the UK has impacted the safety of journalists. The participants stressed that the abuse was carried out by a ‘very vocal minority’ [Int 3] but feared today’s journalism students will be entering the industry at the ‘peak’ of the issue [Int 1]. Several respondents used a similar analogy to explain the intrusive nature of online abuse, highlighting that it would not be acceptable in any other profession:

‘If somebody walked into a doctors’ receptionist and started saying that stuff to them, there’d be consequences, but for some reason because it’s online and because you’re in an industry which wades around in public opinion, somehow you’re just supposed to bite your tongue.’ [Int 4]

The editors and journalists had received abuse across all types of stories, from court reports to light-hearted reviews, and across all social media platforms. They had differing experiences of the platforms on which they faced the most abuse. Some believed that Twitter was ‘negative and toxic’ [Int 12] and the ability to hide behind an anonymous account made it easier to troll journalists [Int 2]. Other respondents believed abuse was more commonplace on Facebook and one editor described the platform as a ‘misogynistic place’ [Int 3]. Most journalists agreed that Facebook Live video broadcasts pose the most worrying threat to trainee journalists. They said these broadcasts, which are filmed live to thousands of viewers, attracted the most ‘personal’ remarks [Int 6] and ‘disgusting’ abuse [Int 11]. One respondent was targeted with ‘nasty’ comments on her appearance while filming a broadcast at a crime scene, where she was expected to film to thousands of viewers with little information on the incident [Int 11]:

‘Most of [the Facebook Lives] I’ve done have been completely riddled with abuse. Seeing [the abuse] on the screen is like going onto a stage and enacting a scene where you have to make the lines up as you go along, with thousands of people jeering at you and yelling insults.’

The respondents echoed the literature (Demos 2014, OSCE 2016), stressing that while men and women journalists experience online abuse, it is women who face the most personal and targeted attacks. One male journalist believes abuse is ‘far worse’ for female reporters [Int 8] while editors agreed that trolls tend to target trainee female journalists who are ‘thrown in at the deep end’ [Int 3]. One editor explained:

‘We do have abuse at our male journalists, but it is nowhere near the same level and it’s nowhere near the same personal level. So it might be insulting them as a professional, but it’s not doing things like going and finding their partner or posting old pictures.’ [ibid]

Storm said the motivation for the abuse was around a need to ‘silence women’, with trolls using language about ‘doing things to their mouths that will shut them up’:

‘Where I’ve seen the worst examples of this is around women journalists who are effectively putting their head above the parapet and they’re being shot down. And the motivation almost entirely seems to be this notion of silencing women because they’re stepping “out of line”’.

Furthermore, the respondents echoed findings (Behind Local News 2020) that suggest racist abuse has worsened this year, particularly following coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement. One local reporter had cut down her use of Facebook due to racism on the platform following coverage of the movement [Int 5]. Another broadcaster said:

‘It’s brutal. You feel an attack personally as well as professionally. You see how people engage and how people don’t see you as someone who is deserving of equal rights, or they don’t feel like your voice should be heard. It’s like you’re existing in a world that you don’t really fit into. When you’re black and then you happen to be a journalist, it’s like a double whammy.’ [Int 8]

While the participants stressed that personal attacks should never be tolerated, they highlighted that it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between criticism, insults and abuse. One editor said comments were often on a 'sliding scale' and it was difficult to know where to 'draw the line' [Int 3]. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of negative comments, however minor, had a serious impact on almost all the journalists and editors we interviewed.

The impact of abuse on working journalists

A recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was that journalists are expected to grow a 'thick skin' [Int 3] to cope with criticism and abuse. The three male journalists we interviewed said that, for the most part, they were able to 'brush it off' [Int 9] and had developed a 'superiority complex' [Int 10] to cope with insults against their journalistic credibility. However, the female participants had experienced more personal and severe abuse and this had a profound impact in both a personal and professional context. This reflects the findings of the literature review, which suggests that women journalists are more greatly impacted by online abuse and receive more personal attacks (Chen et al 2018, Sharman 2020a). It is perhaps interesting to note that whilst reference to the 'thick skin' traditionally associated with journalists was highlighted mainly by more senior journalists (Int 2, 3, 11, 12), all respondents were in agreement that abuse and harassment were not acceptable and should not be seen as part of the job.

The online nature of abuse meant it was difficult for the journalists to escape it. One participant said it was like trolls 'coming into your personal environment and abusing you' [Int 2] which could cause real anxiety for reporters [Int 1]. This anxiety was heightened for local reporters, as one former newspaper journalist, who now works in television, described:

'The problem with working at a local newspaper is that your name is on the story, so you become a target for those people to abuse you. I've had [abuse] so much. And I'm not sure that everybody has it as much as I have. I don't know if it's because I worked at a small paper, so I was writing the majority of the stories. I've gone into a role now where I'm actually very happy that I'm behind the scenes and I'm not as abused at the moment'. [Int 7]

This relentless and intrusive abuse had a severe personal impact on some of the journalists we spoke to. Respondents reported suffering mental health problems which they directly attributed to the job, or they said the abuse had triggered existing depression or anxiety, echoing the findings of the Behind Local News survey (2020). One respondent said a 'hidden aspect' of abuse was the impact that it could have on journalists' family and friends, which could be 'very upsetting' for them [Int 2]. One reporter said since she started a career in journalism, her anxiety 'has gone up so much, it's more noticeable' [Int 5]. Another broadcaster said:

'Sometimes I come home and hug my husband and just cry, because it's just difficult now. There are days where I am just broken and I can't remove myself from it. There are days where you just see that everyone is against you, because you're not in the right mind state at that time, because you're downtrodden and you've been beaten up emotionally.' [Int 8]

Our findings reinforce others' research (Gardiner 2018, Storm 2018) showing the level of abuse and the personal impact on journalists from ethnic minority backgrounds is particularly severe. One black reporter said reading racist comments on her title's Facebook page was 'triggering' for her anxiety [Int 5] while another broadcaster said she feels the collective pain of abusive comments aimed at any minority community [Int 8]. This suggests the students and trainees most vulnerable to online abuse may need tailored, individual support - both during their training and in the newsroom. Storm echoed this, calling for more 'diverse people and voices' in newsrooms and organisations to 'recognise those people who are more vulnerable' to abuse.

On a professional level, the impact of online abuse on the participants was concerning. For some reporters, it caused them to suffer a level of imposter syndrome and doubt their ability - particularly at the beginning of their career. One BBC radio editor said her young team can feel 'frustrated' and 'upset' when a story they are proud of is 'hijacked' with anti-BBC abuse [Int 4]. She explained that attacks on their work could have more of an impact than personal abuse from trolls:

'In some ways, it probably affects them more than if somebody's just making personal comments about whether they're fat or ugly. Because you know you can write those off, you don't need to reply to those... but they feel they need to get drawn into these discussions with people who challenge the quality of their journalism.'

While all the respondents said they would not change the type of stories they wrote to avoid abuse, it did make some of them reluctant to promote their work on social media, reflecting previous research (Posetti

2020). One broadcaster said she deliberately censored what she shared online to avoid abuse while another said she avoided social media after witnessing the abuse that other reporters with an active online presence had received. Editors were concerned about the ‘real repercussions and implications’ of abuse on young journalists in particular [Int 3]; they feared online abuse sends a ‘worrying message’ to young people who want to enter the industry [Storm]. One newspaper editor expressed concerns that the fear of facing abuse may prevent young women from applying for editorial roles [Int 3]:

‘You don’t want to see young women shying away from those public-facing roles, or wanting to dream big, because they’re so worried about putting themselves out there. That surely can’t be good for debate and it certainly can’t be good for democracy, can it?’

For one broadcaster [Int 12], the growing hostility and division on social media, and her experiences of online abuse, have had such an acute impact that she is leaving the industry altogether:

‘People say “oh you need a thick skin” - well I definitely haven’t got a thick skin. The other thing people say...is that as a broadcaster, you put your head above the parapet, so it goes with the territory that you are going to receive abuse. I’m sorry but no, that is not ok in my book. There’s nowhere where it says as a broadcaster, it is ok for people to send you personal abuse.’

Actions by employers

Storm stressed that online abuse ‘has to be taken seriously’ by news organisations, ‘from the top right down to the interns’. The employers we interviewed were taking several steps to support their staff, both emotionally and practically, and the journalists felt supported by their editors and knew of the reporting processes in place. This may not be reflective of the national picture, as the NUJ Safety Survey (2020) found just 56% of respondents knew about policies in place to deal with safety issues. However, it was encouraging to see the measures being actioned by employers and it is important to make students aware of the help that is available to them. The employers interviewed had begun to roll out sessions on online abuse, which are delivered to new trainees during induction. One editor at Newsquest [Int 1] has prepared the training to use across the organisation. She said the sessions are clear that online abuse ‘shouldn’t be part of your job and it’s not acceptable’; however, they address the fact that trainees need to be prepared that it could happen to them. The difference between ‘fair comment and abuse’ is also explained during these sessions, in addition to what trainees should do if they are targeted with abuse. Another editor addresses abuse during the interview process to prepare potential employees, although she said it was ‘really sad’ that this was necessary [Int 2]. The employers we spoke to had a set of tiered actions to escalate reports of abuse, from blocking trolls to reporting abuse to the police and gathering support from internal security if serious threats were made.

The importance of having an open conversation about abuse was stressed by many of the respondents. Editors said they offered the opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with journalists who experienced abuse, opening up a dialogue around it:

‘It’s about coaching and helping to rebuild that confidence, because, quite understandably, some of the reporters will feel like they’ve had a bit of a knock. You shouldn’t have to say to somebody ‘grow a thick skin’ - that just doesn’t feel like the right thing to do.’ [Int 3]

Three editors we interviewed had experienced abuse during their careers, which has perhaps shaped their proactive approach. One journalist said she had struggled in a previous role where editors had built up a ‘resilience’ to abuse and ‘don’t know how to deal with it’ [J7] and Storm highlighted the value of having editors who are ‘approachable’ and recognise the impact of abuse, in addition to representing a ‘diverse spectrum of identities’. One editor believed her staff felt able to confide in her because she was a woman and had experienced abuse herself:

‘I appreciate that perhaps for my team, it’s a lot easier to come to a female editor to discuss it - because you’ve been there. You know exactly what it is like. Would they have that similar conversation with a male editor? Or would they feel like they’ve got that understanding? I’m not entirely sure, but because I’ve been there, I think they relate to that.’ [Int 3]

In addition to offering support to staff, the editors were making changes on their titles’ social media pages. Editors were clear they had a zero-tolerance policy for blocking and banning the worst offending trolls, letting the ‘hatred stay with them’ [Int 1] - which they said made their journalists ‘feel a lot better’ [Int 2]. One newspaper had filtered around 200 words and phrases from their Facebook page, preventing many abusive comments from appearing in comment sections [Int 3]. Editors had written letters making it clear that abuse

would not be tolerated on their pages and had launched campaigns to invite other readers to help them call out abuse [Int 2, Int 3]. But the editors felt they were limited in what they could do and were lobbying social media platforms for support in ‘keeping their house in order’ [Int 3]. For example, one editor called for the ability to turn off Facebook comments on main page accounts to allow them to block comments on stories most susceptible to abuse. The four employers recognised that not enough had been done to support journalists with the issue in the past and were taking active steps to change that. One editor said:

‘For so long, it feels like it’s been one of those things that’s been swept under the carpet. And it’s been “oh well, It’s just part of the day job”. Actually no, it’s not part of the day job, and nobody should have to put up with this.’ [Int 3]

This reflects the thoughts of Storm who said in order to change the newsroom we need a diversity of voices who understand what it is like to face abuse:

‘The only way we’re going to tackle this is by making sure that we have more diverse people and voices and stories and that we hear stories of communities that are less represented. In order to get that - we need women, we need people of colour, we need trans people, we need everybody to be part of this. But what we also need is news organisations to recognise those people who are more vulnerable.’

Recommended practical actions

While the respondents stressed that journalists should not have to put up with social media abuse, they urged students to be prepared. One editor said that although she makes it clear to her employees that abuse is not acceptable, ‘the genie is out the bottle’ [Int 4]. The interviewees felt it was important to prepare students before they enter the industry and some had found their own training helpful; however, others felt it failed to prepare them for the reality that was to come. One former newspaper reporter said:

‘It definitely needs to be taught before you go into the profession, how to deal with [abuse], because I didn’t think that it was going to happen to me that much. I knew people hated journalists, but I didn’t think it was going to be as intense as it sometimes is’. [Int 7]

It is vitally important, therefore, that students are equipped with the tools they need to cope with online abuse, making them aware of the abuse that journalists often face and how to reach out for support. The respondents offered both practical and emotional recommendations, which can provide the framework for a resource aimed at journalism educators.

On a practical level, several tips on using social media emerged from the interviews. Students were advised to keep work and personal accounts separate and to keep personal profiles ‘locked as tightly as they can’ [Int 10]. Having strict privacy settings on Twitter enabled one reporter to ‘filter comments from bots and trolls’ [Int 5], preventing her from seeing much of the abuse aimed at her or her title. Storm echoed this, urging students to ‘lockdown their personal stuff’ on Facebook to protect them from doxing, when trolls find and publish personal information without consent. Many of the respondents said it was important to switch off from work outside office hours and to avoid looking at work social media accounts. Yet they recognised this is ‘very difficult’ and something they struggled with implementing [Int 1]. One editor said that while journalists are told to switch off, it is not a solution to online abuse:

‘You can tell people, maybe it’s best if you don’t use [social media] when you’re not at work, but...telling people not to do things that most other normal people can do freely without fear - that’s not great, that’s not a solution’. [Int 2]

Storm echoed studies (Brems et al 2017, Wolfe 2019) which show there is an increasing pressure for journalists to develop a ‘private-public persona’ which can prevent them from switching off outside work. She explained that ‘toeing that line between managing that and protecting yourself is really difficult’ and called for more support from employers to recognise the true ramifications of expecting journalists to share personal information online. Storm also recommended the practice of ‘swarming’, where a group of people step in to positively amplify a journalist’s work, ‘shouting louder’ to ‘drown out the abuse’.

There was a mixed response when we asked if it was helpful for journalists to respond to negative comments. While the respondents said that journalists ‘have the right to respond if they want to’ [Storm], they advised against it in most circumstances. One newspaper reporter said he tended to respond if abuse was

emailed to him directly [Int 10]. Other journalists had responded to comments which called the accuracy of their work into question. One reporter said he addresses comments which may spread misinformation about his story, 'more for the benefit of anyone who might be scrolling down the comments rather than that particular troll' [Int 6]. Another editor responded to readers who were questioning the accuracy of the title's coverage of coronavirus deaths, detailing where the figures were sourced which 'tended to quell the debate' [Int 3]. Another journalist said she had responded to serious abuse on 'a few occasions' but was unsure if she would recommend this to students [Int 7]. She mentioned a recent occasion when she had responded to abuse:

'I said, look, I'm somebody's daughter, I'm someone's girlfriend, I'm someone's sister. How would you like it if someone spoke to your family members like that? And the guy actually apologised in the end. But I don't really know what the solution is, because I think they like it when you respond. And if you respond, they just go back and forth.'

For the most serious and relentless trolls, the respondents agreed the best solution was to delete the comments, block the perpetrator on Facebook or mute them on Twitter. Respondents advised against getting into a 'slanging match' [Int 6] or trying to win over trolls, as they said this could rile them up and make them angry. One broadcaster said:

'I took action this year [2020] and unfollowed a lot of people, I muted several people and I am not afraid to block people if they are persistently offensive. And that's made a massive difference.' [Int 12]

Trainees were advised to talk about the abuse with colleagues and editors and to be confident in using the reporting processes available. Respondents generally felt they had a 'good support system in place' [Int 6] in their newsroom and were encouraged by editors to 'escalate it immediately' [Int 9] if they faced abuse. They urged young journalists to mention abuse in the morning meeting, 'shining a light' on their experiences and 'taking the heat out of it by not making it a secret thing' [Int 4]. As one editor commented: 'Don't think it has to be huge to tell somebody, you never know how much that has happened to other people.' [Int 4]

Recommended actions for emotional support

In addition to these practical measures, the respondents offered tips for students to help them to cope with the emotional impact of online abuse. They reiterated the need to switch off and have down-time after work and recommended that students establish hobbies that they enjoy. One journalist said exercise and spending time with family and friends helped her to 'deal with the anxieties' that come with the job, helping her to catch negative feelings before they spiralled out of control [Int 5]. Another broadcaster said she spent 'weeks' feeling awful at the height of the backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement, but made an intentional decision to focus on something else:

'You need to remove yourself, try and find something that you enjoy doing. I make jewellery and so that's an outlet for me. So find something else that will take you out of that mindset.' [Int 8]

The respondents stressed the importance of speaking out about the abuse, not only to colleagues but also to family and friends. This helped journalists to 'take a bit of the heat out' of any abuse they experienced [Int 4]. Some respondents found developing a 'superiority complex' helpful [Int 10], belittling trolls in their heads to maintain confidence in their own ability. They recommended teaching students that any abuse they may experience is rarely about something they have said or written:

'Whenever people are trolling or abusing – they're never actually thinking about you. They are just thinking about how they can have the sharpest, wittiest, shittiest thing to say, because it's like a kind of sport. And so very rarely is it about anything that you have said or done – and any other journalist publishing the same thing would have got the same.' [Int 4]

A newspaper journalist, who had a level of 'imposter syndrome' when she started her career, urged trainees to stand strong in their ability:

'Just see past it and think, wow, what a miserable person and what a miserable life this person probably leads. I think it's really important to not let it impact your capabilities, but also your knowledge of your capabilities, your self-efficacy, because you got this job for a reason. Don't let a person who doesn't have an absolute clue on the internet tell you otherwise.' [Int 11]

However, the respondents emphasised that despite an expectation for journalists to be ‘this really tough cookie’ [Int 7], ‘there will be times when you get really upset’ [Int 5]. They called for the normalisation of vulnerability among journalists and urged trainees to know they are not alone if they are affected by abuse. Two reporters had taken time off when suffering from mental health issues and they recommended that journalists take time away from social media if they are struggling. One reporter said:

‘Everyone has a right to feel safe and respected and to be happy in the workplace. This job is no different and if it’s genuinely affecting your confidence and your mental health, you need to take a step back, maybe talk to employers and see if there’s a way you can avoid social media for a bit.’ [Int 8]

Research suggests that ethnic and religious minorities and those from LGBT communities receive a disproportionate amount of abuse (Gardiner 2018, Amnesty International 2018b) and one black reporter stressed that it was particularly important for these students to be emotionally prepared. She said:

‘There are not many black journalists around anyway, and I would say to them - if you’re going to go into journalism, just make sure you actually want to do this because it’s not going to be nice, especially when you have to write stories about race. I’ve always wanted to be a journalist and that’s helped me a lot during the times that I’ve wanted to quit, just to push me on a little bit.’ [Int 5]

With this stark advice and the knowledge that journalists who are most impacted by abuse are those who are ‘already more vulnerable’ [Storm], we question whether enough targeted training and emotional support is being given to students most vulnerable to abuse - before they enter the industry. While our respondents were keen to highlight that journalism was a ‘fantastic career’ and wanted to avoid putting students off the industry altogether, they stressed that, unfortunately, practical and emotional preparation was vital. One editor, who now addresses abuse during the recruitment process, said:

‘I think journalism is a fantastic job. I love it. And I never want to say something in an interview which might make that career sound less appealing. But in the last year, I felt it was important to raise it with people before they even start, to say unfortunately this is something that you can expect, tell them what we would do to support them, but also ask how they would feel about that. And it’s really, really sad and not something that I wanted to do. But how can you not?’ [Int 2]

Conclusion

Although it is unsettling that we have to prepare journalism students for a world of online abuse, our findings show it is necessary. The respondents felt that abuse was becoming more commonplace, more vile and more serious - which could have a profound effect on trainees’ emotional wellbeing and cause them to doubt their ability. We have identified the following recommendations for students from our own and wider research reviewed in this paper, which we hope can assist journalism educators in training on the issue:

- *Separate accounts:* Keep work and personal social media accounts separate ;
- *Security settings:* Lock personal accounts and use strict settings on work accounts to filter out trolls;
- *Switch off outside office hours:* Avoid reading comments or looking at work social media accounts outside work;
- *Practise ‘swarming’:* Positively amplify the work of your colleagues who may be facing abuse;
- *Know you have the right to respond:* If the accuracy of your story is being called into question and you choose to respond, remain factual – but don’t expect to have the last word, as you can never win a ‘Twitter spat’;
- *Differentiate between attacks and criticism:* Identify those criticising your work on journalistic grounds and those making personal attacks;
- *For the latter - block, ignore and mute:* Use these tools liberally;
- *Document any threats or abuse:* Make a note of the number of threats and the details (including screenshots);
- *Report abuse to management:* Use the processes in place to report abuse and threats - editors should support you in approaching the police if necessary;
- *Ask your editors for guidance:* They can help you to distinguish between abuse, genuine criticism and a criminal offence;

- *Speak about the impact of abuse with colleagues:* ‘Take the heat off’ the abuse by raising it in the morning meeting;
- *Build a support network and confide in family and friends:* Share your feelings with people who will allow you to be upset;
- *Do things you enjoy outside work:* Find something that takes your mind out of the work environment;
- *Remember abuse is never about your ability:* It is rarely about something you have said or written;
- *Take time away from social media if your mental health is suffering:* Ask your editors to support you with this;
- *Know abuse is never acceptable and not part of the job:* You should not just have to put up with it;
- *It is okay to be upset:* Even the most experienced journalists and editors can be affected.

Although we hope this training will equip students with the tools they need to cope with abuse, our findings highlight that perhaps there is still too much responsibility placed on victims of abuse to learn to just deal with it. Our research confirms others’ conclusions that further action is needed across news organisations, social media platforms and governments to change the culture of online abuse (Posetti 2020, Chen et al 2020, Ferrier 2018, Amnesty International 2018b). While it is encouraging to see editors taking proactive steps to support their staff, we do question whether further steps could be taken to support trainees. Should young journalists be sent out to record Facebook live broadcasts, with little information, knowing the torrent of abuse they often receive? Is there too much pressure on journalists to develop a personal brand, sharing information that may make them vulnerable to abuse? Finally, we question whether people from diverse backgrounds are receiving enough targeted support when research shows they are most at risk of online abuse?

While our research paints a stark picture of the current climate of online abuse against journalists, respondents urged students not to be deterred from the industry and Storm echoed this in what may be seen as something of a rallying cry to our students:

‘Go into journalism with your eyes open. Just as if you were going to a warzone and wearing a physical flak jacket, I would say there needs to be more work done to understand the emotional flak jacket you need to steel yourself for this. It’s not always pretty. You may incur some difficulties. You may incur some attacks, you may incur some abuse. But it’s not your fault as a journalist. As long as you toe the kind of ethical principled line of journalism and you don’t do anything unethical and egregious, then it’s somebody else’s choice to hurt you. And that’s not right. It may not feel great to hear this, but chances are that you’re not alone in this. And actually it’s almost in a way proving the point that we need your voice, if somebody is out there to try to take you down because they’re intimidated by you.’

Opening up conversation during journalism training is therefore vital to prepare students for what they might face. But we do hope that one day, this training will not be necessary at all.

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Appendix

List of interviewees with in-text reference

Name	Title	Reference
Hannah Storm	Ethical Journalism Network director & CEO	Named
Samantha Harman	<i>Oxford Mail</i> group editor (Newsquest)	Int 1
Jenna Thompson	Hull Live digital editor (Reach plc)	Int 2
Laura Collins	<i>Yorkshire Evening Post</i> editor (JPI Media)	Int 3
Jess Rudkin	BBC Radio Bristol editor	Int 4
Melissa Dzinzi	Reporter at Leeds Live	Int 5
Conor Gogarty	Chief reporter at Bristol Post/Bristol Live	Int 6
Katie Ridley	Journalist at ITV Anglia and formerly <i>Huntingdon Post</i>	Int 7
Anonymous	Female broadcast journalist	Int 8
Kristian Johnson	Investigative reporter at Leeds Live	Int 9
Anonymous	Male reporter at a daily newspaper	Int 10
Susie Beever	Senior reporter at <i>The Yorkshire Post</i>	Int 11
Emma Britton	BBC Radio Bristol breakfast presenter	Int 12