

Preparing students to deal with the increasingly challenging environment of journalist harassment on social media

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Abstract

This report details a research project undertaken into the value of teaching journalism students – specifically sports journalism students – about the extent of online harassment in their field and possible strategies to deal with it in current and future contexts.

The project's teaching focus centred around the use of social media in journalism, something which has become less a choice than a necessity as the digitisation of the profession continues at increasing pace and depth. It examined the extent to which journalists have become targets for malicious communication online and the characteristics of such communication, and it looked at ways those in receipt of the above can, and should, respond in order to negate its often corrosive effects, particularly psychological.

In this context, online harassment is defined as the send-

ing of content designed to alarm or distress the recipient e.g material that is offensive, abusive, carries the threat of violence or may be racist, homophobic or sexually explicit. Harassment is by definition habitual in nature; it cannot occur in isolation.

The report will outline the changes in students' perception of key themes of the topic – identified via secondary industry and academic-based research - by drawing on their responses to five key questions both before and after four hours of teaching (2 x 2 hour sessions). These sessions were the first time the online harassment of journalists has been a formal part of a module teaching plan. Conclusions have been drawn from the survey data in order to identify building blocks for the future development of the topic as a permanent feature in the curriculum of the BA Sports Journalism course at University of South Wales.

Introduction and context

The online harassment of journalists via social media is a problem which has worsened in recent years. At the most simplistic level, this is down to two distinct trends; social media global usage increasing to more than half the world's population (53%) by January 2021 according Kemp (2020) via [DataReportal's Global Digital Overview](#), and the ever increasing centrality of social media to effective contemporary journalism across all delivery platforms.

Much academic literature has outlined the social media influence inherent in journalistic day-to-day methods of news-gathering, engagement with the public and promotion of content (Bossio 2017). Studies such as that by Cantor and Brookes (2016, p875) describe social media as a “primary working tool” of modern-day journalists.

The consequence of the above has been an explosion in the volume and severity of online harassment directed at journalists. To examine this situation in its most current UK context, a study by [Kean and Maclure \(2020\)](#) found that journalists were facing ever more serious levels of abuse and harassment online and that the preparation of journalism trainees in higher education for this reality should now be viewed by educators as a necessity. Harassment has long featured in journalism course modules dealing with ethics, but traditionally journalists have been regarded very much as the harassers rather than the harassed.

While the freshness of Kean and Maclure's research underlines the developing nature of this problem, it is complementary to data harvested in both academic and policy-making spheres in recent years. Binns (2017) found online abuse of journalists to be ‘ubiquitous’ after interviewing 267 journalists, with female journalists very much bearing the brunt of the onslaught. Data from an investigation carried out by Posetti et

al for [UNESCO](#) published in April 2021, found online harassment has increased significantly. Furthermore, in March 2021 the UK Government published its first [national action plan](#) aimed at tackling the threat to journalists.

At a more local level, the problem of online harassment is increasingly being experienced by students on the BA Sports Journalism course. Their position as publicly acknowledged information providers and opinion-formers is fledgling, but the roots of a more malignant form of interaction have been visible.

While there has been no official reference point for the above scenario available to teaching staff via recognised feedback portals such as LOOP and the annual NSS Student Survey, informal class discussion as well as ad hoc monitoring of social media accounts, has revealed examples of disparaging communication.

Level Six students who have gained opportunities to produce content for media organisations and have relatively extensive portfolios of published work have, for obvious reasons, offered the bulk of the anecdotal evidence which has helped to inform this project at its most local level. With profile, comes attention, and with attention comes an inevitable proportion of harassment. Anecdotal student evidence has revealed that while such harassment is not entirely unexpected, it presents challenges and uncertainties in dealing with it from a procedural, and more acutely an emotional, perspective.

Overall aim of the project

The intended outcome of this project was to measure the understanding and awareness of online harassment among trainee journalists, to determine their readiness to deal with it, their conception of the value of teaching them awareness of the topic and coping strategies, and to determine the extent to which they view it as a necessary component of journalism higher education courses in the future.

In a study by Smith (2016) of the relationship between social media and journalism education, the citing of a 2015 report from the Knight Foundation by Lynch (2015) is used to demonstrate a perceived gap between the content of journalism curricula and the requirements of real-world professional standards in the field. Smith (2016, p16) highlights one of the key conclusions of the research of Lynch being a need for educators to ‘create program values around the currency of the profession’. However, there is a relative dearth of research into how teaching around the project’s topic is received and valued by students themselves.

This project does not drill deeply into the science surrounding debates pertaining to what extent personal, emotional character traits can be taught as opposed to being non-malleable products of genetics and/or upbringing. However, theories surrounding the benefits and/or limitations of resilience training – such as those expounded by Martin and Murrell (2020) in their study of attitudes towards its value among journalists in Australia - did influence the choice of questions put to students in the survey undertaken pre and post-teaching.

In short, the intended outcome of this project was to reliably measure the value of teaching as a means of preparing future journalists to deal with arguably the most unfortunate emerging demand of a profession evolving at breakneck speed.

Research method adopted

While this project did seek to contribute to the establishment of widely accepted theory surrounding a developing and relatively thinly researched topic in journalism pedagogy, the overriding aim was to ascertain the value of plugging a known gap in the curriculum of the specific BA Sports Journalism course taught at USW. This, on a general level, made it well suited to the methods and underlying principles of action research.

[Koshy \(2010, p1\)](#) contends that action research is ‘a method for improving practice. It involves action, evaluation and critical reflection and – based on the evidence gathered – changes in practice are then implemented’. Furthermore, Koshy asserts that action research entails participation and collaboration among people with a common purpose, ‘it is situation-based and context specific, it develops reflection based on interpretations made by the participants’. Such characteristics correspond neatly to this project.

[McNiff and Whitehead \(2002, p15\)](#) describe action research as ‘a practical way of looking at your practice

in order to check whether it is as you feel it should be'. While extensive secondary research into online harassment of journalists provided confidence that embedding the topic into the curriculum was the correct choice of action, this project was a means of confirming, or otherwise, that assumption.

Five questions aimed at establishing students' awareness, understanding and appreciation of the importance of the topic made up a survey which they were asked to answer before the teaching sessions, and then again afterwards. The comparison of the before and after responses formed the basis of the experiment. Based on investigation of the subject as evidenced by credible academic research and industry and governmental data, the questions asked were:

Do you understand what constitutes online harassment?

How aware are you of the problem with online harassment (in relation to journalists)?

How ready do you feel you are to deal appropriately and effectively with online harassment?

How far can university teaching prepare you to deal with online harassment?

How important is it that dealing with online harassment becomes a part of all university journalism courses?

The first two questions served the purpose of (1) ascertaining familiarity with the wider topic, and (2) establishing the level of knowledge surrounding its specific relationship to journalism. This was viewed as a vital base from which to progress the project and formed the basis of the opening two-hour teaching session which was primarily focussed on imparting knowledge. The session was interactive in terms of discussion and debate of key points at regular intervals, and critical thinking among the students was encouraged, but there was a more traditional teacher-centred approach to imparting key information which included data, real-world examples of relevant behaviours and anecdotal input from industry professionals. Questions 3-5 were aimed more at students' preparedness to confront online harassment, now and in future, and the content and structure of the second and final two-hour session focused on what strategies could be exercised in order to deal with it?

In order to measure impact, students were asked to answer each question on a semantic differential sliding scale as defined by Taherdoost (2017) of one to 10. Open-ended questions were avoided because of time constraints and to facilitate a greater ease of response for students. The questions were closed-ended in order to connect with numerical scaling used to derive precision of response. This allowed the collection of sharply focused comparable data (before and after teaching) compatible with the construction of illustrative data tools such as a radar chart in the poster accompanying this report.

While the above benefits of the survey method are outlined, there are potential weaknesses surrounding response validity. Brule and Veenhoven (2016) cite the contention of Morin (1994) that respondents to sliding scale surveys become influenced by what they perceive to be the project's expected schema. Closely related to this is the potential for interviewer bias, a data influence noted by Brule and Veenhoven as being noted by Smith et al (1995). In the context of my role as the students' teacher, responses may have been influenced by the pre-conceived expectation that metrics regarding all five questions would increase following teaching sessions. A sub-conscious obligation to endorse my abilities as a teacher, or to indicate a benefit from taught sessions as resulting from their own ability to concentrate on, absorb and understand fresh concepts and ideas may also have been a factor.

Students were asked to complete the survey anonymously via the website polljunkie.com, anonymity being a means hopefully of deriving responses that were as honest as possible. The survey was completed the first time immediately before the opening teaching session and then again after the final one.

One challenge was ensuring uniformity of the sample across two separate teaching sessions a week apart, something which was virtually impossible. A disappointing total of 12 students out of a 23-strong cohort attended the first session, completing the survey beforehand as asked. The number increased to 18 for the second session. This resulted in the overall teaching experience lacking consistency throughout the group as a whole and therefore responses are potentially skewed. To negate the effect of this, the content of the first session was revisited in a teaching format that was more condensed at the start of the second session as a means of bringing those who had been absent up to speed. However, some of those absent had taken the opportunity given during the intervening week to access the presentation missed at the first session online which helped further in redressing the above-mentioned possible inconsistency.

Atkinson (1994) notes the inherent tension that arises when a teacher is expected simultaneously to be a

researcher. She holds that the confidence and assuredness of a teacher and the researcher's requirement to question and doubt multiple facets of the project, are not easy psychological bedfellows.

Review of literature

Research into the online harassment of journalists has accelerated in the last half decade, and the extent of the problem uncovered is both jolting and indicative of the well-documented wider social problem relating to aggression, intimidation, abuse and harassment which increasingly characterises cyber interaction globally (Chan, Cheung and Lee, 2021). Public figures are particularly vulnerable to such treatment. Kilvington and Price (2017) study the vitriol, often racially motivated, aimed at English footballers in both the Premier League and international domains.

Journalists are public figures for the same reasons as politicians and celebrities, albeit without necessarily attracting the same level of adoration, scrutiny or indeed revulsion. Tsfati (2017) cites the expectations of trust in journalists by the general public and the perception of them as influencers of opinion. Tsfati cites the study of Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) into hostile media perceptions in political journalism and a behavioural pattern that sees people on both sides of a political divide view a relatively benign piece of media coverage as disparaging of their point of view. This pattern can be applied to the inherently emotion-triggering sphere of sports coverage. While Gillmor (2004) believed that, even in the very formative years of social media, the extent of the public's newly acquired publishing power entitled them to be labelled 'the former audience', the reach and strength of platform commanded by journalists, especially employees of mainstream outlets, remains powerful and far-reaching, making them prime targets for online harassment.

Literature in the form of academic theory, and research data produced by policy-making bodies and [representative professional organisations](#), as well as anecdotal evidence from survey samples and ad hoc [first person pieces](#) and [interviews](#), has thrown a glaring spotlight on the extent to which the online harassment of journalists has increased in volume and consequence in recent years. The situation has been shown to be [especially acute for females](#), though other factors are an influence. Lewis, Zamith and Coddington (2020) identify not only gender, but the personal visibility of individual journalists and the size of the news organisation they work for as being factors in online harassment. Their study involving 75 US-based journalists found that the more visible i.e. higher profile, a journalist enjoyed and the bigger the organisation and thus more diffuse the audience they worked for, increased the volume of harassment and level of the vitriol.

The requirement for something of a fightback and the increased urgency of this need in recent research, literature, [industry commentary and guidance](#), has been marked, not least because of the recognition of some [appalling consequences](#) of online harassment via industry surveys and cross-company investigations. Material from all these sources has informed this project. Studies referenced previously, such as those by Chen et al (2018), Binns (2017), Martin and Murrell (2020) and Kean and Maclure (2020) have provided an academic basis, but relevant global organisations have exerted an influence as well. The International Press Institute (IPI) launched a [four-step framework](#) in February 2020 aimed at improving protection for journalists facing online harassment.

The IPI has not been alone. The DART Centre, a journalism resource centre and global network based at New York's Columbia Journalism School, has compiled a comprehensive [tip-sheet](#) outlining best practice for journalists in dealing with online harassment. Non-media specific organisations such as the [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) have also addressed the problem.

In terms of classroom strategies for training journalists to deal with the problem, Bradshaw (2021) cites the use of guest speakers from industry as particularly effective. Bradshaw also recommends the incorporation of harassment in media law syllabuses, the regular discussion of its potential throughout student news-days, the teaching of topics such as information security, social media guidance and the encouragement of students to see online harassment as a critical issue worthy of discussion within other modules.

Further planning details, implementation and data outcome

This project received approval from the USW ethics committee in order to ensure its integrity and compliance with the USW Research Good Practice Policy (RGPP). Ethically, it was considered low risk by peers and tutors, though it was not without some potential risk to the participants i.e. the students. In fact, some of the characteristics of the research method are categorised as high risk by the RGPP. While participants were assured of anonymity, the subject of online harassment is potentially sensitive. Open discussion of students' personal experience of such harassment was, while important to the learning process, approached

with caution and in a manner that ensured no participant felt pressured into contributing or was made to feel emotionally vulnerable in any way. Additionally, while unlikely, there was some risk of psychological stress and fleeting humiliation in the disclosure of experiences at the hands of cyber bullies. Such scenarios were avoided due to the above classroom interactional methods, but risks were acknowledged.

In endorsing the project, the ethics committee requested terminology in the title be changed. Specifically, this involved the removal of the word 'abuse' in the context of the problem faced by journalists online. Instead of a focus on how journalists deal with online abuse, the project became a study in how they may 'overcome the challenges faced'. However, while the edited terminology was more benign, it did nothing to alter the plan, focus and delivery of the action research or the substance and meaning of the subject matter at hand.

At the outset, the exploration of resilience teaching theory was identified as a useful theoretical pillar of the quest to establish the effectiveness of teaching this subject to journalists. Tempiski, Martins and Paro (2012) explore the need for medical schools to develop teaching strategies that cover emotional and holistic competences that people dealing with life and death scenarios on a daily basis will need in addition to explicit expertise and knowledge in their chosen field. While online harassment of journalists may not be perceived to be as stressful or emotionally draining as scenarios encountered by medics, the debate crosses the boundaries of multiple professions. For time constraint reasons resilience teaching theory was not explored in depth.

The question of where teaching the topic of the online harassment of journalists should sit within the BA Sports Journalism course was also thoroughly considered. Given the sensitivity of the subject and the advantage social media experience – i.e the use of social media for professional purposes – would have to students studying the topic, it was decided to place it at Level Six. By this stage, too, students would have a far greater depth of knowledge of how journalists exploit and utilise social media platforms, and therefore the potential pitfalls. The topic was deemed to be in no way of an introductory nature suitable to be pitched at, for example, Level Four.

The homing of the lessons in the Media Ethics in Sport third year module was also something that remains uncertain. With the focus on journalistic behaviour, and obvious legal and ethical implications, there is obvious symmetry with this particular module. However, the flipping of the harassment question – to one which dealt with journalists being the ones harassed – does not have an explicit correlation with the module outcomes housed in the official course specification. There may be an argument for incorporating this subject into practical portfolio-based modules centred around the production of journalistic artefacts and methods of obtaining them, areas where there is a strong social media influence.

Data obtained was, as previously explained, intended to demonstrate progression, or otherwise, relating to the students' evaluation of the teaching of the subject. To enable this the first three questions of the five already outlined were aimed at providing an indication of students' understanding and awareness of the issue and perceived preparedness to deal effectively and appropriately with it. In terms of understanding and awareness there were significant two-digit jumps in the 0-10 values of the average individual survey response. The largest post-survey discrepancy, however, was in students' perception of their readiness to 'deal appropriately and effectively' with online harassment, travelling from a 4/10 value to 7/10. While this would suggest the students had taken significant value from the teaching sessions, whether such readiness is down to the development of so-called 'emotional competence' or more to do with a simple increase in knowledge and awareness is unknown. Certainly there appears to be scepticism over the value of university teaching in this regard, with the average individual assessment travelling only from 6/10 to 7/10 between the before and after surveys. There does, however, appear to be an acknowledgement of the importance of the topic as a whole, with an average rating of nine on the scale being received in response to the importance of online harassment forming part of future university curricula.

Further evaluation

Research indicates the BA Sports Journalism course at USW, presumably along with many other journalism courses throughout the UK, is behind the curve in its teaching. Kean and Maclure (2020) validate this as more than just an assumption. The data obtained, as well as the enthusiastic engagement with the subject suggests students see a real value in learning in this area, albeit with limitations surrounding the extent of what can be achieved in terms of emotional resilience.

Furthermore, the subject speaks to the commitment to holistic education principles at USW as well as the teaching of the BA Sports Journalism course. Factors like the USW commitment to [Personal Academic Coaching](#) and the quest to enhance the richness of the student experience via the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching provide reference points for the teaching value in this project which might be viewed as separate from, yet complementary to, the more explicit summative assessment requirements of any university degree. Vukic (2019) argues that while journalism education has been forced to place an ever-increasing emphasis on technological mastery in the digital age, the development of a journalist to as close to 'the complete person' in terms of such qualities as social and emotional development, must still be the end goal for educators. The development and bolstering of students' confidence and social skills continues to be an important element of BA Sports Journalism, with behavioural standards, common courtesy and professionalism, qualities that are insisted upon by teaching staff.

Social media has increased the amount of time aspiring journalists are in the public eye and therefore the amount of time their behaviour can be scrutinised and judged, even by those who are scarcely qualified to do so. Beckett and Deuze (2016) highlight the centrality of emotion to the future of journalism, arguing that mobile digital consumption of the news results in people living in the media rather than with it. Device-addiction, they argue, fosters intimacy with the media. This has relevance to the subject of this project and the importance of the extracted data because of the implications to journalist-audience closeness, interaction and engagement, the regularity of these and the subsequent potential for connection to lead to harassment.

One potentially negative implication of this project is the demonising of social media among students. Harassment is very much a negative element of these online platforms and a serious and emerging issue that needs to be addressed. But it should not obscure positive benefits on offer to journalists through the effective use of social media, or how vital it is to do so in the ever more competitive employment market. What researchers like Harper (2010) have dubbed the Social Media Revolution, is now woven into the person specification of virtually every media job on offer. The move by the UK's largest regional publisher Reach plc to [appoint an online safety officer](#) in October 2021, underlines the ubiquitous nature of social media in contemporary journalism.

Next steps

This project has shown teaching and preparing students to face the challenges of online harassment to be a welcome addition to the BA Sports Journalism course. The data obtained, the impression gleaned from the classroom environment, informal student feedback and evidence from associated secondary research indicates that a permanent place in the curriculum is warranted.

The topic, in keeping with the wider subject of journalism and particularly the characteristics of the professional field, is changing at breakneck speed. It is imperative therefore that the content of teaching material is updated on an annual basis. This should include tracking of relevant academic research, and industry commentary. An anecdotal element also helps bring the topic alive. Some of the most impactful parts of the teaching sessions here were the real-life stories of harassment, some of which had real resonance with students. Part of the sessions were also given over to monitoring social media harassment on that very day by accessing the accounts of prominent journalists such as BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg. This needs to remain at the forefront of practical group tasks during teaching sessions. Guest speakers are another essential ingredient. While the time-sensitive nature of this project precluded their use, the incorporation of media personalities with their own stories and advice are an invaluable tool for broadening the students' perspective.

The stage of the course at which to introduce this topic is also something worthy of ongoing consideration. Is there an argument to introduce it at Level Four so the important message and safeguarding strategies can be utilised by students for the rest of the course? This has been avoided initially for holistic reasons such as the potentially off-putting, intimidatory nature of the subject, as well as it being more specialised but such a decision is open to be changed if there are compelling pedagogical reasons.

Closely linked to the above is where to place the module in terms of the course curriculum? At present it resides in Media Ethics for reasons already outlined, but this is likely to require a minor modification to the module learning outcomes which at present can be said to incorporate the subject only tenuously. There also needs to be a move to incorporate the subject into summative assessment. Embedding it into essay titles and presentations is one way, but it could also be introduced to social media packages submitted as part of

practical portfolios i.e as well as showcasing posts and explaining the circumstances and their relation to content, a description of any harassment encountered and how it was dealt with in line with taught guidance. The subject could also feed into work placement modules which involve students keeping journals of their time with external agencies and also producing a minimum amount of content. The monitoring of social media reaction to that content could be incorporated to both the second and third year work placement modules, together with strategies used to combat negativity or aggressive/abusive communication.

Overall, higher education establishments have a duty of care to journalism students in embracing a topic that until now has been largely overlooked. The extent to which social media has become embedded in the everyday life of people, and especially journalists continues to intensify. The online harassment of journalists as public figures is likely to worsen and there is no feasible catch-all solution on the horizon. The only way to confront it, therefore is to raise awareness and equip those at most risk with the armoury to deal with it. This project has helped add to the contention that university journalism courses need to be at the forefront of that process – now and in the future.

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