



NUJ response to the DCMS consultation on its Internet Safety Strategy green paper

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The National Union of Journalists is the representative voice for journalists and media workers in the UK and Ireland. The union was founded in 1907 and has 30,000 members. We represent staff, students and freelancers in the broadcast media, newspapers, news agencies, magazines, books, public relations, communications, online media and as photographers.

The NUJ code of conduct was first established in 1936 and it is the only ethical code for journalists written by journalists. The code states that a journalist “at all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed”.

1. Online abuse and harassment has become a major issue for journalists, especially women, and it poses a major threat to freedom of expression, the right of the public to be informed, and democracy.
2. Journalists play a crucial role in a free and democratic society, acting as a public watchdog and keeping society informed. However in recent years, many more are subjected to online abuse because of this role. This abuse has led to incidences of journalists self-censoring, either avoiding stories completely because they fear it will trigger abuse, or censoring the amount of information contained to minimise any backlash in the form of online abuse.
3. While the abuse is not confined to women journalists, articles and comments by women appear more likely to spark torrents of abuse and the nature of the abuse directed at women is particularly vile, frightening, insidious and criminal. As a result, women journalists have withdrawn from online forms of interaction with the public, a crucial aspect of their role as journalists, to protect themselves and their families. A consequence is that there are even fewer female journalists' voices in an already male-dominated field.
4. An analysis of 2 million tweets by the think tank Demos, in 2014, revealed that male public figures are several times more likely than women to receive abuse on Twitter. Journalism was the only category where women received more abuse than men, with female journalists and TV news presenters receiving roughly three times as much abuse as their male counterparts.
5. Journalists who write about traditionally male topics, such as sport, technology, or gaming, are often singled out. Emma Barnett, who had previously written about technology, told the Huffington Post: “I’d get responses like, How the f**k do you

understand this? You don't know what you're f**king talking about, get back in the kitchen."

6. The NUJ in partnership with the University of Strathclyde conducted a survey of members in Scotland in early 2015, shortly after the referendum on Scotland's independence in September 2014 and in the lead-up to the general election in May 2015. Only journalists who had experienced online abuse in the previous year were asked to respond. Of those, almost 40 per cent had experienced abuse 10 times or more over the previous year and 83 per cent said the abuse continued outside working hours.
7. Twitter was the most commonly used platform accounting for 65 per cent, however other mediums were used including Facebook, blogs, online comments, emails, online forums and chatrooms. Around 30 per cent revealed there had been threats against themselves and/or their families, including death threats. The abuse included sexist, racist, homophobic, sectarian, racist and political comments. As a result, a number said they now avoided certain subjects which they knew would be controversial. One respondent (male) said: "I experienced persistent, threatening, specific and sinister abuse. It was evident they were monitoring my personal activities." Another, again male, said: "I suffered racist and sectarian abuse and threats of violence against me and my family. In some cases it involved sexual slurs directed towards my wife and my mother."
8. More than half responded that the online abuse had caused them other problems including stress, anxiety, fears for personal safety, low self-confidence and self-esteem and feelings of isolation and helplessness.

They said:

- It damages your confidence. It makes you worry about what stories to cover and how to report them.
- By saying anything or taking a position on feminism or Scottish national politics you are opening yourself up to a lot of hatred.
- For a time I refused to tweet on Scottish politics - but returned because it is a means of doing my job and of "broadcasting".
- Made me more cautious and careful.
- Stopped engaging as much on social media - almost feeling apologetic for being a journalist.
- I was watchful that I was not left vulnerable to potential attack on jobs and in geographical areas I was working that I didn't know that well. I was very careful not to share any information that could put me at risk.

The personal life of 37 per cent of journalists was affected:

- I was forced to change my routine.
- It made me more cautious in discussing my personal political affiliations in public
- I was demoralised and anxious.
- I was very proud of my job and career - being attacked on social media put a dent in my confidence generally.

- I took additional security precautions such as checking my vehicle was not being followed, installing additional security measures at home.

Only 17 per cent reported incidences of online abuse to the police and only 5 per cent were satisfied with the police response. Comments included:

- The police offered sympathy, but confessed “trying to get a prosecution is impossible with Twitter”.
- It was just not taken seriously. Sense police had “better things” to be dealing with.

A press release on the survey is available here:

<https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/cyberbullying-the-media-survey/>

9. Since the 2015 survey, further evidence has emerged of the extent of online abuse faced by women journalists and the serious impact.
10. Women journalists are no strangers to violence – in the newsroom, on the front line and in cyberspace. Online abuse is a growing problem for journalists and the nature directed at women is particularly vile.
11. Cyberbullying of women is silencing women at a time when women in the media need to be heard. And if journalists are avoiding certain stories, that is a major problem for free speech and democracy.
12. There is a misapprehension that violence against women is confined to physical acts. That is not the case; it includes a range of actions that harm, or cause suffering and indignity to, women and children. These include physical, sexual and psychological violence, sexual harassment and intimidation at work and in public.
13. For many women journalists, online abuse has become an everyday event. But just because it is not physical, does not mean it is not abuse.
14. Online abuse was identified as one of the most pressing problems facing women journalists in a recent survey (spring 2017) by the NUJ in Scotland, as part of the Stronger Voice for Women in the Media project, funded by the Union Modernisation Fund through the Scottish TUC, together with the gender pay gap, lack of career opportunities, flexible working and male bias.
15. Members have also expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of action by social media platforms to complaints. On Twitter, muting rather than blocking seems the preferable method of dealing with abusers as there is no further interaction, but the abuser does not get to enjoy the satisfaction of being blocked, which some boast about as a “badge of honour”.
16. Female journalists face a double burden – being attacked as journalists and as women. They experience threats of rape and other physical violence directed against themselves and family members, including young children. Graphic imagery is sent to them and a number have had strangers turning up at their homes during the night or approaching them in public spaces. There have been threats to smash a woman journalist’s face with a sledgehammer, to slash another’s face with a knife so she would require major cosmetic surgery and a number have had to take personal security measures.
17. International human rights lawyer Nani Jansen Revenlow said that online harassment of women journalists was not “just” a gender issue, but a threat to

democracy. She supports the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's recommendation that "online abuse must be dealt with in the broader context of gender discrimination and violence against women to ensure that the same rights that people have offline must be protected online." <https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/online-harassment-of-women-journalists-and-international-law-not-just-a-gender-issue-but-a-b8c6a5c7e128>

18. In Scotland, online abuse is so pervasive that advice for journalists is being included in media guidelines when covering potentially controversial issues. For example, women journalists are especially vulnerable when they report on violence against women and feminist issues. It gets worse for women when race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity are also involved.
19. A free media is essential to a free and open society. Any attempts to silence female journalists are direct attacks on freedom of expression and the role of journalists as public watchdogs, keeping the public informed. **That is why it is imperative that there is an end to impunity and that the police, prosecutors, employers, ISPs and social media platforms take online abuse seriously by adopting a zero tolerance approach.**
20. The platforms, not just Facebook or Twitter, but forum sites and blogging sites such as Wordpress should be made to adhere to the same guidelines as any responsible publisher.
21. While the legislation is already there to deal with internet abuse, there is no willingness to act and without adequate resource or commitment is utterly pointless. At the moment there is nothing more than lip service from the authorities who will prosecute those who go after celebrities but mere mortals are left to cope alone. There is a whole generation growing up thinking it is fun to be a troll and get away with it.
22. Governments should show political will to treat online abuse of journalists seriously and ensure perpetrators are prosecuted. In Scotland, there is legislation providing for prosecution. It is very much in the public interest that prosecution is the default position. There have been examples of successful prosecutions when football managers have been targeted. Why not journalists, given their important role?

Case study 1

A women journalist, with many years of experience, reported that she had to be provided with personal security after she faced an avalanche of abuse on social media, blogs, forums and chatrooms after a story was published with her byline.

She said: "The abuse was so bad I think I was trending on Twitter for around 12 hours. I deleted my Twitter account on the advice of my work, but the abuse continued on Twitter, on message boards and blogs. The police contacted me after concerned members of the public reported the abuse. There were threats of gang rape, murder and bombs. They found out a previous family name, information about my children, my partner, my former partner, they just raked through my whole life. My work responded as much as they could but said they had never seen that level of abuse directed at a journalist.

“The police said they were going to proceed with an investigation as the abuse was criminal. Abuse included threats they were going to take a sledgehammer to my face and would plant a bomb under my car. I had already had panic alarms installed and infrared security because of a previous incident. My work gave me personal security; police gave me advice about checking for bombs under my car. In the end police decided they couldn’t prosecute. They said it was a hazard of the job. There was no prosecution.

“I had to go through everything and remove all old pictures. My partner heard people trying to get into the house in the middle of the night. It was horrendous. I was exhausted and it affected my health. There were posts appearing daily and I was fighting a faceless enemy. If I had been a young reporter I would have been driven to near suicide. I don’t suffer fools gladly and can stand up for myself but it was relentless.

“Because we are journalists nobody cares. People see it as a hazard of the job, as if we don’t have a safe workplace because of what we do. If it happened to a librarian I’m pretty sure there would be a lot more outrage. We are seen as fair game.

“I have ad people say to me, ‘Maybe you should write about other things like make up because it’s not worth it.’

“It has changed the way that I live my life in terms of my personal safety and security. I was at a shopping centre and someone came up to me and said ‘You’re that cow from [name of employer]. I really want to punch fuck out of you.’

“It’s frightening to have to check looking for bombs under your car. I don’t expect death threats based on my work. It has completely changed my life. It has had an impact on everything. I couldn’t enjoy family life for a while and it affected my health.

“Now I don’t tweet anything contentious. It has changed the way I interact with people. Part of my job is meeting people, speaking to them, but it’s not safe anymore. I don’t know what I am walking into.

“If we start getting journalists intimidated, who is going to hold power to account? Nobody cares because we are journalists. If someone puts a sledgehammer to my face, because I’m a journalist I deserve it is the current attitude. There’s no protection, nothing to deter them.”

Case Study 2

A woman journalist had to order taxis and make hairdressing appointments under an assumed name because she feared she would be confronted and attacked by her online abusers. She said male and female journalists could produce similar articles, but the extent of a backlash received by woman far outweighed any reaction to what was written by men.

Another problem is the relentless nature of the harassment from hundreds of people with messages which, in isolation, are not criminal but the cumulative effect of being bombarded with so many messages is damaging.

Combined with threats to withdraw support, whether in terms of funding or readership, the consequences for journalists include further stress and mental health effects, concerns about job security and questioning their personal judgement in case they provoke yet another backlash.

“The extent of the abuse directed at women journalists is the equivalent of standing in a public square surrounded by 1,000 people all screaming at you.”

She said she had previously complained to police and was told they would not be proceeding without examining all the evidence but they changed their mind after publicity about the issue. “If it happened again I wouldn’t report it. You have such a fight just to get justice. Online abuse is on a spectrum. If it is not curbed there will be more incidents such as what happened to Jo Cox. There’s always potential for a situation to become explosive.”

- The NUJ has published guidance for members on online abuse: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-guidance-online-abuse/>