

Chapter 3

Protecting journalists from harassment

Comparing existing protection mechanisms and the effects on democracy

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Abstract

There is a quickly increasing body of studies and reports on harassment and intimidation of journalists around the world. These series of acts have a chilling effect on media freedom and journalists’ freedom of expression. The research literature on the topic has mostly focused on intimidation and harassment of journalists – particularly sexual harassment of women journalists – or journalists’ experiences of online harassment, and the impact on press censorship. In this chapter, we contribute to the debate by exploring the nexus between the harassment of journalists and the protection mechanisms adopted by leading news media organisations, professional journalism associations and other institutions, and national governments. We then discuss the effects on democracy in the 18 countries participating in the 2021 Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM). Our findings indicate how legal support and protection mechanisms might enhance journalists’ capacity to realise the news media’s democratic role in practice.

Keywords: online harassment, safety of journalists, violence against journalists, press freedom, anti-harassment mechanisms

Introduction

Journalists consider the incidence of online harassment of journalists (especially, for example, of women and ethnic minorities) and death threats targeting investigative journalists as one of the greatest threats to journalism and democracy. As outlined in Chapter 1 (Tomaz & Trappel) the performance of democracy and media often go hand in hand. According to the *Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*, democracies around the world are in a “state of malaise” (Foa et al., 2020: 2). 2019 had the highest democratic discontent and lowest index on record (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). The worst scores are noted in media freedom and freedom of expression worldwide. The malicious use of social bots to spread disinformation and target journalists, and patterns

of abuse to control, influence, distort, or weaken news production, must be overcome for the news media to fully realise its role in democracy. That role is to provide citizens with credible information, to provide a forum for active public debate, and to function as a watchdog (Trappel et al., 2011). Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, this role has become even more critical, as the contagion has been used by some authorities as an excuse to crack down on the news media (Funk et al., 2020; Jacobsen, 2020). UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet made a clear statement on the situation of journalists during the Covid-19 pandemic, during which several states imposed restrictive measures, culminating in over 130 alleged media violations and arrests (United Nations Human Rights, 2020; Wiseman, 2020).

MDM Indicator and related research question addressed in this chapter:

(F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment

How do leading news media support and protect their journalists in case of harassment, particularly online? (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a: 30)

In this chapter, we explore the level of harassment in the 18 participating countries of the 2021 Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c), focusing particularly on online instances and the extent to which the harassment of journalists is threatening democracy. In what follows, we first provide an overview of the international discussion on violence against journalists. We then focus on the extent of harassment and intimidation of journalists in the MDM participating countries and the normative frameworks and support mechanisms adopted by leading news media and journalists' professional bodies to protect and support journalists against harassment. Finally, we discuss how harassment against journalists threatens democracy.

The state of journalists' safety worldwide

UNESCO's *Director-General's Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity* (UNESCO, 2020) indicates worrying trends with regard to the killings of journalists worldwide. Despite the 14 per cent drop in the total number of deaths (from 182 to 156 killings in the previous two-year period and the present, which refers to 2018–2019) (UNESCO, 2018), the fatal attacks against journalists are shifting from countries experiencing armed conflicts to countries considered to be enjoying peace in the past four years. In general, journalists reporting on corruption, human rights, environmental crimes, drug trafficking, and political wrongdoing are the most at risk. Whereas the majority of victims of fatal attacks are male, female journalists face disproportionate abuse and attacks, both on- and offline: "from harassment, trolling and dox-

ing to physical and sexual assault” (UNESCO, 2020: 2). The UNESCO report defines doxing as the practice of collecting and sharing personal, sensitive, and identifiable information with the intent to cause harm:

At its 44th session in June and July 2020, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution (A/HRC/RES/44/12) on Freedom of Opinion and Expression which calls on all States to take active measures to protect the safety of journalists, media workers and human rights defenders so that they can practice their right to freedom of expression. (UNESCO, 2020: 3)

Additionally, the Council of Europe has commissioned a number of studies and reports to assess the state of journalists’ safety in the Council of Europe’s 47 member states and shed light on what is preventing them from fully exercising their watchdog function. These studies report on a series of acts threatening media freedom: physical attacks, intimidation and imprisonment, judicial harassment, abuse of financial levers, and psychological violence. Furthermore, disproportionate gender-based violence, discrimination against women journalists, and consequent self-censorship have been documented in the Council of Europe’s member states and worldwide (Andreotti et al., 2015; Clark & Grech, 2017; Clark & Horsley, 2020; McGonagle & Andreotti, 2016). Violence against journalists – in itself not a new phenomenon – is exacerbated by the interventions of artificial intelligence and social media. International media freedom organisations have expressed concerns regarding the proliferation of smear campaigns against journalists across Europe (Taylor, 2019), and to rising numbers of on- and offline harassment, abuse, and threats directed at media professionals.

These quantitative reports have shown that violence against particularly women journalists nears epidemic proportions. A study by the International Federation of Journalists, including almost 400 women journalists in 50 countries, found that 48 per cent had suffered violence and 44 per cent had experienced abuse online while working (IFJ, 2018). In two additional global surveys – conducted by the International News Safety Institute and the International Women’s Media Foundation, including 977 women media workers in 2014 (Barton & Storm, 2014), and an update to the report, co-authored with *TrollBusters.com* (Ferrier, 2018), including 597 women journalists in 2018 – nearly two out of three journalists surveyed had been threatened or harassed online, and slightly more had experienced physical threats or harassment. More recently, a global survey of online violence against journalists, with 714 women respondents from 125 countries, conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (Posetti et al., 2020), corroborate those findings. It indicates an exponential increase in online attacks on women journalists, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, and a recurring behaviour pattern of women journalists to not report or make public the attacks and abuses they experience

while working. In addition, it points to journalists' reluctance to acknowledge the seriousness of online violence and highlights the fact that online violence has a deadly potential if transitioning offline.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Mijatović, 2016; OSCE, 2020) and Reporters Without Borders (2018) have conducted a qualitative investigation addressing the international occurrence of online abuse and bringing awareness of the issue to authorities of different countries. These reports highlight that journalists worldwide are under threat, but women journalists disproportionately face discrimination, threats, and attacks. For example, the 2019 deepfake (media synthetically created by artificial intelligence, for example, audio, video, or images) landscape map indicates a fast-growing phenomenon with disturbing figures about the circulation of non-consensual pornography targeting women celebrities and news and media professionals (Deeptrace, 2019). To counteract this situation, the European Commission (2020) has presented the European Democracy Action Plan, specifically addressing the issue:

The Commission will propose in 2021 a recommendation on the safety of journalists, drawing particular attention to threats against women journalists, and an initiative to curb the abusive use of lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). The Commission will also work closely with Member States [through a] structured dialogue and provide a sustainable funding for projects on legal and practical assistance to journalists in the EU and elsewhere. (EFJ, 2020: paras. 4–5)

So far, the scholarly literature has mostly focused either on intimidation and harassment, particularly sexual harassment, of journalists (Adams, 2018; Flatow, 1994; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Lemke, 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Matloff, 2007; McAdams & Beasley, 1994; North, 2007, 2015, 2016); journalists' experiences of online harassment (Binns, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Edström, 2016; Martin, 2018; Waisbord, 2020); and the impact on press censorship. This chapter contributes to the discussion by exploring the nexus between harassment of journalists and the protection mechanisms adopted at the level of news media organisations and professional journalism associations, and discusses the effects on democracy in the 18 MDM participating countries.

The extent of intimidation and harassment of journalists

In the opening chapter of *The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021*, Trappel and Tomaz (2021a) set the theoretical framework of the MDM's dimensions and indicators by building upon McQuail's (2009) four roles of journalism: the monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative roles. In McQuail's view, in order for journalism to best serve democracy, it should collect, process, and

disseminate credible information of all kinds; promote the development of a shared moral framework that is inclusive and plural; expose abuse of power and raise awareness with regard to wrongdoing and inequality and promote social change; and, finally, foster collaboration between the news media and the state. Regarding the controversial collaborative role – as collaboration with the state can potentially jeopardise media freedom – McQuail (2009: 130) argues that this “is often only a more transparent and accentuated case of what goes on much of the time”. Based on this understanding, Trappel and Tomaz (2021a: 16) argue that a democratic media system should be based on three pillars: “1) a guardian of the flow of information; 2) a forum for public discussion of diverse, often conflicting ideas; and 3) a public watchdog against the abuse of power in all its various forms”.

In this chapter, we examine the nexus between the magnitude of harassment of journalists in the MDM participating countries and the protection mechanisms adopted at the level of leading news media organisations and professional journalism associations. We do so in light of the MDM’s theoretical framework, which is translated into the indicator on the protection of journalists against (online) harassment (F11). This being said, in what follows, we look at the relative incidence of harassment and intimidation of journalists. Country reports and interviews conducted by MDM teams in the 18 participating countries of the 2021 MDM regarding the indicator F11 are our main source of information (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021b, 2021c). It should be mentioned that the various terms used to frame instances of online harassment, such as “shitstorms” or “cyberstalking”, were not defined in the unpublished *MDM Research Manual 2020* that was provided to country teams conducting the national research:

This performance indicator F11 – protection of journalists against (online) harassment – refers to the increasing number of cases where journalists are threatened or harassed by other people for their reporting. Repeatedly, journalists (often female) were reported of becoming targets of shitstorms, cyberstalking, verbal or even physical attacks and harassments. (Unpublished MDM Research Manual, 2020)

As a consequence, different country teams might interpret these terms differently and frame violence-related issues according to their national contexts. Thus, our aim in this chapter is to present the highlights indicated by the teams rather than re-interpret their findings. Additionally, MDM country teams followed specific criteria to score their countries in relation to indicator F11, most of which concerned legal and other forms of protection mechanisms adopted at the level of news media organisations to protect journalists from harassment, particularly online (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a).

As expected, the picture turns out to be very different from country to country due to various interpretations of the issue, as well as different levels and forms

of violence experienced by journalists in their societies. Generally, harassment occurs mainly online, and women journalists and journalists from ethnic minority groups appear to be victims of harassment more often. An increasing number of threats come from the political extreme right or are directed at investigative journalists. This harassment, consisting of insults as well as outright death threats, is considered by journalists as one of the greatest threats to journalism and democracy today. Based on the country reports produced by local research teams, we divided the countries into three categories: low-risk countries with harassment on the rise (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland); medium-risk countries (Germany, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and South Korea); and high-risk countries (Australia, Canada, Chile, and Italy). This categorisation does not necessarily correspond to the scores the countries received in relation to indicator F11, because the scoring criteria focus mainly on the protection mechanisms adopted at the level of leading news media organisations to address different forms of violence against journalists.

Low-risk countries with harassment on the rise

In the group of countries categorised as low risk, but with harassment on the rise, including, for example, Austria and (Grünangerl et al., 2021) and Portugal (Fidalgo, 2021), few cases of harassment or massive online attacks were reported. Another country in this category is Iceland, where overt threats and harassment of journalists are rare, but do happen occasionally in a non-violent manner, usually in the form of a phone call, an e-mail, or posts and comments on social media (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2021). In Switzerland, two cases of personal attacks on journalists in 2019 received public attention, as well as an incident of a woman journalist experiencing cyberstalking (Bonfadelli et al., 2021).

However, the problem is on the rise in these countries, according to the MDM data: Flemish journalists, for example, mention a rise of online harassment and intimidation. In a nationwide 2018 survey, 15.3 per cent of Flemish journalists indicated having experienced harassment or intimidation in their function as a journalist by political sources, advertisers, companies, media publishers, and citizens, mostly about their gender (46.7%), age (30.3%), ethnicity (5.7%), or sexual orientation (2.5%). Notably, women journalists reported having experienced harassment or intimidation much more regarding their gender than their male counterparts (67.2% vs. 4.3%) (Van Leuven et al., 2019; see also Hendrickx et al., 2021).

In Denmark, too, online harassment is perceived as an increasing problem, especially but not exclusively aimed at women reporters. The fear that not all cases are reported to the police has shown to be well-founded (Østergaard, 2019; see also Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021). In Finland, an increase in online

harassment and intimidation of journalists was associated with the media coverage related to the 2015 refugee crisis, bringing it to the public's attention. According to a survey conducted in 2017, 60 per cent of Finnish respondents reported having experienced verbal abuse in their work, with 15 per cent facing it regularly (Hiltunen, 2018). An editor in-chief of a leading news media organisation stated that both male and female journalists had been targeted, especially online, but that women reporters are harassed more often and more severely (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021).

In Sweden (Nord & von Krogh, 2021), a special cybersecurity team established within the public service media company SVT handles some 35 cases per day of journalists being threatened or harassed – including hate-mail, digital and physical threats, and acts of violence. In some instances, newsrooms had to be evacuated after threats. After investigative reporting on issues such as money laundering in the eastern parts of Europe and violations of human rights in China, Swedish journalists have been victims of cyberattacks and political attacks from other countries (Stjärne, 2020).

Medium-risk countries

Included in the category of medium-risk countries is Germany (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021), where online harassment of journalists is increasing rapidly. A recent survey among 322 German journalists revealed that over 60 per cent of the respondents had experienced harassment online during the last year, and that experiencing coordinated and targeted attacks on social media platforms like Twitter belong to the daily journalist routine (Pappendieck et al., 2020). The figures rose by 20 per cent when compared with a 2017 study (Preuß et al., 2017), and researchers observe a radicalisation of assaults, mainly from the political extreme right, with 16 per cent of the journalists reporting offences or even death threats, as well as physical assaults, while at work. Particularly women are the focus of online hate, as indicated by an interviewed female editor-in-chief:

You have hundreds of comments on some topics within minutes. And that is when you write as a woman, and even more so when you have an immigrant background, [...] that is really ugly. There is practically no topic that I can write about [...] where you don't get sexist comments, no matter what you write about [...] and here we have to protect our colleagues.

There are several examples from Germany of journalists experiencing harassment. A well-known female football reporter for the German public service television provider ZDF, Claudia Neuhaus, experienced online harassment when commenting the football World Cup for men in 2018 (Bau, 2018). Journalists with a minority background are also threatened: Dunja Hayali, a presenter for

ZDF, represents various diversity characteristics and speaks out against hate, making her a target of right-wing extremists, and experiencing online harassment on Twitter is part of her daily life. Georg Restle, an investigative journalist for WDR, received a death threat via mail which, according to the police, was linked to the extreme-right murderer of a politician (Huber, 2019).

Dutch journalists are also harassed, especially online, and the online platform *Persveilig* was launched so journalists could report instances of harassment and threats. Offline, an attack against the building of *De Telegraaf* in 2018 was directly linked with the newspaper's coverage of organised crime, and as a result, the reporter in question and his family were put under security agents' surveillance at all times (Vandenberghe & d'Haenens, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, physical attacks against journalists and hostility towards the press in the Netherlands increased. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) joined forces with their affiliate in the Netherlands, the NVJ, to condemn physical attacks against journalists who were covering the riots that occurred after a curfew was imposed to reduce infection. The IFJ General Secretary Anthony Bellanger made a clear statement on the alarming escalation of violence against journalists: Over 100 assaults were reported to *Persveilig* in just one year (IFJ, 2021). The IFJ and EFJ also condemned the attempted murder of the renowned Dutch crime reporter Peter R. de Vries, who died on 15 July 2021 in the hospital after being shot in broad daylight on the streets of Amsterdam following a media appearance for the programme *RTL Boulevard*. The EFJ and IFJ understand this shocking event as another "tragic blow to press freedom in Europe" (EFJ, 2021: para. 1).

Looking outside Europe, harassment of Hong Kong journalists, both physical and verbal, has occurred frequently since the anti-government movement broke out in June 2019 (Lo & Wong, 2021). Cyberstalking has also emerged as a problem in South Korea, where journalists' e-mail addresses are included in their article bylines, and violent comments and e-mails, often with personal threats, are common in the polarised political environment (Kim & Lee, 2021).

High-risk countries

Among the countries categorised as high risk is Australia (Dwyer et al., 2021), where online harassment has become part of a journalist's everyday life, with broad reports of harassment on social media, news comments, and e-mail (Koskie, 2018; Wolfgang, 2018), with women disproportionately targeted (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2019). In Canada, a 2019 survey of Canadian journalists conducted by the Committee to Protect Journalists (Westcott, 2019) documents a worry among journalists about becoming an online target as a consequence of the need to use social media for work. Seven in ten Canadian journalists called online harassment the biggest threat they

face in their profession. Also here, particularly women journalists face harassment, including death threats and unsolicited sexual messages through social media. In interviews for the MDM research project, male journalists referred to “nightmare stuff” they have heard from their female colleagues (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021: 64). Most of the journalists and newsroom leaders interviewed expressed concern about online harassment, and they described it as one of the biggest threats to Canadian journalists’ safety (Taylor & DeCillia, 2021; see also Westcott, 2019).

In Chile, the World Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders (2020) ranks journalists as “vulnerable” (51st out of 180 countries in 2020) when it comes to protecting their sources and reporting on issues such as political corruption or Mapuche (Indigenous inhabitants) protests against the Chilean state, where several journalists were targets of attacks in 2019 during the protests (see also Núñez-Mussa, 2021).

Turning to Europe, Italian journalists face an upsurge in threats and intimidation, representing a huge challenge to freedom of expression. According to a 2014–2018 study with 3,000 surveyed, among European countries, Italy is where journalists’ safety is most threatened, with 83 cases of online harassment, personal assaults, and intimidation reported, often connected to reporting related to the mafia (Mapping Media Freedom, 2018). At present, about 20 Italian journalists “receive round-the-clock police protection” (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). Geographically, the most dangerous areas in Italy for women media professionals are the Lazio region (34% of reported cases) followed by the Southern regions of Puglia, Calabria, and Campania. In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2021), Italy maintains the score of the previous year (41st of 180 countries). Intimidation and verbal and physical attacks against journalists, perpetrated especially by the mafia or neo-fascist groups, are still on the rise. A new consideration in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index is reported attacks on Italian journalists perpetrated by “no mask” activists and Covid-19 deniers (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

In 2019, the National Federation of the Italian Press, in collaboration with other media bodies, launched the first nationwide quantitative study to assess the extent of sexual violence and harassment of women journalists. The sample included 1,132 women professionals working in radio, television, news agencies, and printed press. The results indicate that 85 per cent of women journalists interviewed had experienced some form of sexual harassment or abuse during their careers – 42.2 per cent had experienced abuses in the last 12 months (see also Padovani et al., 2021).

The extent of harassment and intimidation of journalists varies significantly across the 2021 MDM participating countries. As the following section shows, the same can be said of the protection mechanisms adopted at the level of leading news media organisations and professional bodies to counter harassment.

Guidelines and support mechanisms to protect journalists

Worldwide, journalists generally rely on the support and protection of their employers in cases of harassment. However, employers' support mechanisms for protecting journalists differ significantly. In some countries, journalists enjoy a range of comprehensive support measures, including detailed guidelines, regular meetings, legal support, special units for abuse and harassment, and psychological support. For example, media organisations in the United Kingdom have implemented detailed guidelines for journalists and editors to follow in the event of harassment and have also implemented preventative measures, privacy protection, blocking policies, and threat-reporting mechanisms for employees' social media use. In some cases of sustained online harassment campaigns, news organisations have specific social media teams for liaising with platforms (Trionfi & Luque, 2019). Some newsrooms provide voluntary trauma risk training and mental health training and have regular meetings between social media editors and news teams to observe potential abuse cases. However, freelance journalists, an increasing proportion of the workforce, are left on their own and have no access to the support networks and mechanisms of media companies (Moore & Ramsay, 2021). In contrast, interviews in South Korea show that employers offer therapy to harassed journalists and cover other medical costs related to harassment (Kim & Lee, 2021).

In some countries, newsrooms instead help their journalists on an ad hoc basis when they become targets of harassment, and newsroom leaders generally show support and understanding. Iceland, Chile, Italy, Canada, and Hong Kong are examples of such newsroom dynamics. In Germany, some media organisations lack a special unit to support journalists being harassed, though *Der Spiegel* and *Stern* have made efforts towards such units or ombudspersons. No relevant provisions are included in work contracts, and harassment that happens in the grey area between private and work life is left unaddressed by companies. Adding to the complexity is the fact that the detection rate of law enforcement agencies when it comes to the harassment of journalists generally is low (Horz-Ishak & Thomass, 2021). In Italy, a journalist from *Sky Tg24* claimed that "there is no support policy active in this sense. [...] If attacks [on social media] happen, it is a matter that is independently managed by you and the platform" (Padovani et al., 2021: 344). Similarly, a journalist from *la Repubblica* said: "We have full legal coverage with respect to menaces, for example, or libel lawsuits. It is normal. No other kinds of protection are provided" (Padovani et al., 2021: 344). The interviews conducted for the 2021 MDM project indicate that harassment as an issue continues to be overlooked, and there is broad resistance against reporting harassment by individual women journalists.

In other places, newsrooms have established special teams to tackle the issue of harassment, for example, the specialised cybersecurity team at Swed-

ish public service media. In Sweden, incidents are reported to the police, and security consultants are involved in protecting reporters and their families. The financial cost of security measures in Sweden has quadrupled over the last five years (Nord & von Krogh, 2021).

Media organisations sometimes have legal departments or specialised services dedicated to social media issues, including harassment. Switzerland is such a case, Austria another. In Austria, though media companies generally lack a special legal division dedicated to protecting journalists, when harassment happens, specialised lawyers are employed to defend the journalists. In the case of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation ORF, their Editorial Statute obligates management to defend their journalists against any type of assault (ORF, 2002: §4; Grünangerl et al., 2021). In Belgium, however, none of the interviewed journalists knew of any specialised legal service provided by employers in the case of harassment, and they lacked knowledge of what to do if harassment occurs. In the same vein, no specific entities to address instances of gender-based harassment were reported by Belgian respondents (Hendrickx et al., 2021).

Some media organisations provide resources and training to help journalists safely confront harassment. For example, Belgian journalists have mandatory training on how to respond to physical, verbal, and online abuse and aggression, although reporting varying degrees of satisfaction with the system (Hendrickx et al., 2021). In Hong Kong, interviewees reported that their media companies invested in safety gear to protect them as a result of the violence against journalists during the anti-extradition bill movement in 2019, with one company even procuring bulletproof jackets (Lo & Wong, 2021).

In addition to protection mechanisms, some media organisations have implemented prevention measures. For example, the interviewed editors and journalists in Chile corroborated that they take actions to avoid being identified as reporters, for example, using mobile phones instead of microphones and cameras, not wearing anything to identify their outlet, and parking their cars away from the events they are covering (Núñez-Mussa, 2021). In Hong Kong, interviewees said they had been reminded by their companies to ensure their social media accounts were private to avoid doxing, and *Apple Daily* (ceased to exist in 2021) successfully applied for a court order to protect their journalists from doxing activities. Going further, some outlets have avoided using bylines or have chosen to not show reporters' faces when covering sensitive issues (Lo & Wong, 2021).

Some news organisations, for example, in Australia (Dwyer et al., 2021), struggle to balance the protection of their journalists, readers, and sources with the determination to uphold freedom of speech (Koskie, 2018). Some journalists and editors expressed a desire for audience engagement, but encounter hostility (Anderson et al., 2014). Navigating this balance, Australian news organisations have inconsistent results from their initiatives to protect journalists (Domingo,

2014; Løvlie et al., 2017). Similarly, while some editors in Chile actively defend journalists who are being harassed online, two editors simply disabled the comments section on their news websites. One of them explained: “We used to have a journalist dedicated to moderating comments, but a few years ago we decided to close comments altogether” (Núñez-Mussa, 2021: 109–110).

Going beyond the organisational level, journalist associations in some countries work to protect journalists against harassment by helping members report instances, for example, with the *Persveilig* platform in the Netherlands. *Persveilig* is a collaboration between the Dutch Association of Journalists, the Association of Editors-in-Chief, the police, and the public prosecutor’s office. Despite good intentions, only a few of the journalists interviewed for the MDM project had heard of the initiative (Vandenberghe & d’Haenens, 2021). In Switzerland, the Swiss Press Council runs a centre for complaints, with a similar ambition as the Dutch one (Bonfadelli et al., 2021), and in Denmark, the Danish Union of Journalists “provides ample guidelines and assistance for its members (including freelance journalists)” (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2021: 159). The Hong Kong Journalists Association and other news worker groups in Hong Kong have issued numerous statements and written an open letter to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Chief Executive urging the police to stop the harassment of reporters, and reporters protested police brutality at a police press conference in 2019 (Lo & Wong, 2021).

In Italy (GAMAG, 2020), journalists are beginning to work with other professional bodies, such as universities, to tackle the issue of harassment. An interesting example is a research project conducted by The University of Padova (2019–2021), exploring the complex interplay between online harassment and offline aggressive behaviour and physical attacks against women journalists. Some project activities (survey and dissemination) were performed in collaboration with the National Federation of the Italian Press. The research project also developed guidelines for comprehensive policies on collecting data and providing evidence-based understandings of three types of abuse: gender-based hate speech, image-based abuse, and digital attacks. In recent years, a meaningful collaboration has developed between the above-mentioned commissions and women’s professional associations, such as GiULiA Globalist, to organise training opportunities, join forces to highlight and report ongoing problematic issues, and develop and disseminate tools to address specific problems. GiULiA Giornaliste has also begun a collaboration with VOX: Italian Observatory on Fundamental Rights to develop a project to monitor hate speech against women in the media.

There are some countries where journalists need specific types of protection from the police and security agents at the national level. This is the case of journalists reporting on organised crime or mafia issues in Italy and in the Netherlands, as mentioned before, who live under round-the-clock police protection.

The United Kingdom has various laws which provide protection for journalists from malicious and offensive communication and harassment, though “there is some lack of clarity in these pieces of legislation and their application to journalism” (Moore & Ramsay, 2021: 473). And Finland plans to reform existing legislation to criminalise online harassment and threats (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021).

In most 2021 MDM participating countries, national penal codes do not address the online or offline harassment of journalists. To date, Canada’s legal system has not dealt with cases involving harassment or disinformation campaigns aimed at journalists, though in 2016, a jury cleared a man of criminal harassment charges he faced due to Twitter interactions with two women’s rights activists. The judge “dwelled on both the nature of Twitter and freedom of expression in a ruling that is among the first in Canada” (Csanady, 2016: para. 2; Taylor & DeCillia, 2021). In South Korea, the only legal protection provided to journalists are libel laws applicable to online comments (Kim & Lee, 2021).

The effects of harassment of journalists

Despite the cultural differences and situations, harassment and intimidation of journalists is an increasing problem in most MDM participating countries. The few exceptions lie in countries such as Austria, Portugal, and Iceland, where harassment of journalists is rare or unknown, but journalists can rely on legal support and protection from their employers in case it occurs. The general increase of harassment echoes the findings of previous reports, conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (Posetti et al., 2020; Posetti, 2017; Posetti & Storm, 2019) and the International Women’s Media Foundation (Barton & Storm, 2014; Ferrier, 2018), which indicate that online violence against women journalists has become a “frontline in journalism safety” (Posetti et al., 2021: 5), particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Harassment of professional journalists is also changing, as the attacks are moving offline with potentially deadly consequences. However, there is still reluctance from journalists, especially women, to report incidents of harassment and, as the 2021 MDM interviews show, there is a lack of awareness or even acknowledgment of gender and power (in)equalities inside newsrooms and in the digital media environment that might exacerbate the exposure of women (see Padovani et al., Chapter 4).

The harassment and intimidation of journalists have implications for journalists’ mental health, risk increasing self-censorship when news gathering and reporting, and influence future professional prospects. Some interviewed journalists considered leaving the profession altogether. Harassment, physical attacks, and death threats directed at journalists violate freedom of expression and media freedom, and affects “the right of society to access a plurality of

information” (OSCE, 2020: 13) and hence threatens democracy. Harassment threatens the news media’s performance at the three levels of a democratic news media system (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021a): the production and dissemination of quality and diverse information by removing women or dissenting voices from the public debate; the role of the news media as mediators of the public debate by jeopardising online discussions that may affect people’s lives; the watchdog function by targeting investigative journalists with death threats, judicial harassment, and abuse of financial levers. The protection of journalists against harassment is of paramount importance to safeguard the ability of journalists to perform the news media’s democratic role and fulfil their right to the freedom of expression, in the MDM participating countries and elsewhere.

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