#journodefender

Turning trolling against journalists on its head

Executive summary

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In recent years, alarms have been raised about the effect of social media on political discourse and democracy. One under-explored aspect of this is online propaganda and harassment of journalists. Journalists – in particular female journalists – are open to online attacks and physical abuse. Harassment campaigns constitute an assault on the freedom of the press and expression worldwide, and are intended to censor independent voices and criticism of authoritarian or populist regimes.

In this report, based on interviews with journalists in Sweden, the Philippines, Mexico, Ukraine, Pakistan and Egypt, we trace the connection between disinformation, journalism and democracy, and show how authoritarian leaders are benefitting from the same social media platforms that have destabilised the global media industry.

Recent years have seen an increase in reports of harassment of journalists, both in Sweden and internationally. Multiple surveys confirm that female journalists – wherever they are in the world – are significantly more at risk than male ones from online hate and harassment, as well as physical abuse. These threats and abuse are part of female journalists' daily lives: in one interviewee's words, "as natural as breathing."

The journalists we interviewed described online smear and hate campaigns, death threats, surveillance by governments, physical assaults, sexual harassment, phone hacking, publishing of personal photos, arrests, and murders. The consequences of this constant hatred include extensive preparation for the consequences of hard-hitting reporting or perhaps worse, self-censorship and falling silent.

Where once internet platforms helped citizens and democracies make strides – as during the Arab Spring – they are now wide open to exploitation by trolls and authoritarians. So far, large tech companies' willingness to act on misuse of their platforms has mainly been based on media and political pressure, or dramatic drops in share prices.

Urgent action is needed from democratic governments before our institutions crumble, leaving in their place a public square regulated by US businesses and dominated by unscrupulous leaders and troll armies. Sci-fi dystopias like Black Mirror and 1984 have never cut so close to the bone.

Recommendations:

1. Democratic governments should work across borders to modernise state and international legislation including alignment with human rights law.

2. Social media and search engines must subject themselves to public scrutiny through non-governmental, transparent monitoring and audits on their duty to act against hate, harassment and threats online without restricting freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

3. Independent journalists and researchers should monitor and expose disinformation and propaganda, and harassment and threats against journalists, with a focus on female journalists and politically fragile countries.

4. New finance vehicles must be developed to support media, backed by government, civil society and philanthropic entities.

Cold War Tactics

Harassment, Hatred And Threats: Journalists In The Firing Line

The result of the Brexit referendum in the UK and election of populist leaders like Donald Trump and Roger Duterte has driven home a new and uncomfortable fact: social media with all its deceit, bias, lack of transparency, and hidden agendas is consolidating its place in the global media agenda and in democracies around the world.

Globalisation and digital democracy are disrupting the news environment, with internet platforms drawing away advertising revenue from the media, and journalists' traditional gatekeeping role pushed aside by the rise of self-publishing.

There is a growing awareness that independent journalism is desperately needed to hold power to account and judge what is true and what is false. Newspapers with an investigative agenda are starting to bounce back, gaining from "the Trump effect". News outlets like the Financial Times, New York Times and the Guardian have found new support among subscribers.

But journalists are increasingly being singled out by politicians as fair game to be targeted. Trump's statement that the media "is our country's biggest enemy" legitimises state surveillance by authoritarians such as Sisi in Egypt and Duterte in the Philippines, who are keen to lay their hands on journalists' sources.

The increase in hatred and harassment online experienced by journalists we interviewed is linked to disinformation and propaganda campaigns carried out by states and political interest groups, including cyberwars with global or regional ambitions, or groups with cultural or financial motives.

In multiple surveys carried out in Sweden and internationally, journalists reported increased levels of threats against them in recent years, especially female journalists. This is corroborated by the testimony of women we interviewed in five countries for this report. Many independent ventures set up in harsh media environments are led by women. They told us they felt it was necessary to break loose from patriarchal workplaces, in order to report on the misuse of political power and socio-economic disparities.

Disinformation, Trolling And Micro-Targeting

Disinformation tactics and trends are constantly changing, adapting to detection and crackdowns by social media platforms or governments. Whether it's impersonation, fabricated content, or networks of coordinating accounts, social media platforms have become amplifiers for new forms of political gamesmanship.

The Kremlin is in the spotlight for weaponizing information as part of its hybrid war, using state-controlled news and social media accounts alongside troll factories and sometimes military force. The aim is to stoke division and weaken morale by feeding audiences conflicting narratives, both in former Soviet countries, and European or North American democracies.

But the Kremlin is not alone in waging hybrid war or running troll factories. Facebook has taken down networks of false accounts in Iran, Macedonia and Kosovo[1]. Homegrown disinformation exists too: Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Project warned that

the majority of new troll and bot activity comes from political parties spreading "disinformation and junk news around election periods".[2]

The number of countries where trolling and bots have been used to influence voter constituencies in a clandestine and sometimes illegal manner rose from around 28 in 2017 to at least 48 countries in 2018. Coordinated campaigns can see a journalist or politician receiving thousands of "weaponized" messages within minutes.

For the most part, democracies have been slow to pass legislation modernising digital platform regulation and financial legislation for elections, although there has been no shortage of responses to disinformation.[3]

In March 2018, a whistleblower disclosed that the data of 87 million users had been harvested without their consent and used to test political messaging. Cambridge Analytica, co-founded by Donald Trump's former political strategist Steve Bannon[4], devised ways of fine-tuning messaging. Themes like "crooked Hillary" or "lock her up" were tested to see which messages got the most traction.

After the Brexit referendum, political strategist Dominic Cummings revealed that Vote Leave had delivered 1 billion targeted ads to voters: "we ran many different versions of ads, tested them, dropped the less effective and reinforced the most effective in a constant iterative process."[5]

The technology may be new, but the same old class of political spinners and strategists, led by authoritarian leaders, have appropriated the tools that once appeared to offer an open, connected world, and weaponised them to further agendas of repression and hate.

Tech Platforms Have Overtaken Legacy Media

Tech platforms have outwitted legacy media. The Reuters Institute's 2019 Digital News Report found that 55% of people now prefer to access news through search, social media and news aggregators, where algorithms are typically used to select and rank stories, rather than editors.[6]

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google and YouTube make cornered the market for selling ads, hoovering up much of the revenue that legacy media previously relied on. In recent years Facebook and Google – as well as Craig Newmark, founder of online ads website Craigslist – have created funds to support journalism.[7]

Meanwhile, the way we consume news and information has been transformed. Our gatekeepers are gone, replaced with machines which, unable to recognise context and tone adequately, are poor guards against inaccuracy and extremist content. Media outlets have to compete for our attention 24/7 against social apps designed to push emotional buttons. Hate speech and negative narratives spread faster than facts and a measured tone.

As social media companies have expanded, they have faced thorny challenges – disinformation and fake accounts, harassment and hate campaigns, and foreign interference in elections. In some cases, the impact has been devastating. In Myanmar, the UN said that Facebook's lack of action on hate speech had had a 'determining role' in the Rohingya tragedy, where 1 million people were forced into exile and thousands slaughtered. In India, disinformation on WhatsApp has fuelled lynchings.[8]

After years of pressure from the media, NGOs and lawmakers for more transparency, Twitter and Facebook have set up ads transparency centres, where researchers can find basic information about ads being run by a particular page.[9] Yet, there is still little information or public consultation about how content policies are developed and how algorithms operate. Access to data is closely guarded, making it almost impossible to carry out independent analysis of the scope of problems and the effectiveness of platforms' actions to tackle them.

In countries like Brazil, Malaysia and South Africa, Facebook-owned WhatsApp has become a primary network for discussing and sharing news.[10] WhatsApp has come under pressure from governments to decrypt and allow security services to monitor communication, and Telegram has been banned in Russia and Iran.

Country Studies

Trolling has almost become synonymous with Putin's cyber-warfare against Western democracies. But just as with President Trump, authoritarian minded paymasters in the five countries in our study - Mexico, Egypt, Ukraine, Pakistan and the Philippines - have found that the social media environment is friendly to their bullying.

During the interviews for this report, journalists in five countries described how hate, threats and harassment, commonly specifically targeting female journalists with sexualised language, have spread and are pushing journalists to be very careful about the topics they cover and what they say. This phenomenon is worldwide.

Here we present quotes and stories from Mexico, Ukraine and the Philippines. The full country studies, including Egypt and Pakistan, are available at journodefender.org.

Mexico

■ In Mexico, the media is corrupted by the war against drugs and a system of political rulers who are also the country's largest media advertisers. Journalists are targeted by a government surveillance system called Pegasus that listens in on conversations and monitors computers and mobile phones.

On 21 March 2017, investigative journalist Miroslava Breach was shot by gunmen as she drove her son to school. She had been investigating forced removal and killings with a colleague, Patricia Mayorga. They believed that their combined published stories would protect them against the criminal and political interests they exposed. Nobody has yet been convicted. Mayorga now lives in exile for her and her family's safety. One year on, she says, "I can admit to fear, pain and anger. But I am not scared, they cannot defeat us, they cannot make us stop being journalists".

> *Running a newspaper, radio station or television outlet in Mexico usually means relying on a single powerful client who spends exorbitant sums on advertising with a simple warning: 'I don't pay you to criticise me'. That client is the government of Mexico."*
>
> **Azam Ahmed,**
> *New York Times bureau chief for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean*

Ukraine

■ In Ukraine, homegrown cyberbullying escalated after the release of the Panama Papers, exposing the country's oligarchs who control mainstream media through the "jeansa" system – with propagandists masquerading as journalists. Ukraine is a target for the Kremlin too.

During the Euromaidan protests in 2013, the safety of journalists in Ukraine deteriorated dramatically. Male and female journalists alike were beaten up, taken hostage, threatened and harassed. Female journalists reported rape, sexually harassment and threats in Lutsk, Odessa and Slovyansk. Attackers tended to target journalists who were seen as being part of the enemy or working for the "fascists in Kiev" – an expression common in Russian troll factories.

> *We didn't have much cyberbullying until two years ago when we disclosed Ukrainians who appeared in the Panama Papers. The targeted bullying that followed, with lists of journalists circulating, was systemic and not just an angry public lashing out at us. It was an organised campaign."*
>
> **Katya Gorchinskaya,**
> *Executive Director, hromadske.ua*

Philippines

■ In the Philippines, serious journalism is a dangerous pursuit and is hampered by President Duterte's army of trolls that confuse the public by pumping out fictitious news. Around 12,000 people have been killed in Duterte's war on drugs, many by police and others by vigilantes.

In 2016 Rappler, one of the few media outlets openly criticising Duterte's government, published three ground-breaking articles. They described how President Rodrigo Duterte had won the elections by exploiting Facebook's algorithms and flooding social media with fake accounts delivering "manufactured reality". CEO Maria Ressa and many of her employees have been directly targeted and attacked. At one point Ressa received 90 hate messages an hour through social media. The government has filed 11 legal cases against the Rappler team since 2018.

> *I have worked in war zones: then you can take cover. But with online threats, you don't know what's for real and what isn't. I don't know when it jumps from the virtual world to the real world."*
>
> **Maria Ressa,**
> *CEO, Rappler*

Conclusion

Across the world, social media platforms are being exploited to conduct harassment campaigns against journalists, as well as activists, minorities and other vulnerable groups. This harassment has become a new kind of media censorship – often directed by the state but using non-state instruments – and affects female journalists particularly badly.

Based on the extensive interviews conducted for this report, three things are clear.

1. Journalists, especially female and non-binary ones, are increasingly at risk of online and physical attacks. It is impossible to predict when online activity will spill over into offline action, but regardless, there is a toll taken by both these threats, as well as increased likelihood of self-censorship and journalists leaving the profession.

2. Those behind harassment campaigns are often not easily identifiable. But there are clear signs that governments, particularly authoritarian and nationalist ones, are financing and justifying trolling to frighten off the opposition and suppress journalistic reporting.

3. Social media platforms have become a serious structural problem threatening liberal democracy, press freedom, and freedom of speech. Having created this infrastructure, technology companies have a special responsibility for cleaning it up - but governments, regulators and philanthropic organisations also have an important role to play.

If left unanswered, it is clear that structural intimidation of journalists, pushed for by forces beyond the public eye, will critically endanger independent reporting and freedom of speech. In some countries, this is already happening.

Despite the best efforts of NGOs, academics and tech journalists, too little is known about the scope of disinformation and harassment online. Social media and search engines should begin subjecting themselves to public scrutiny through non-governmental, transparent monitoring and audits on their duty to act against hate, harassment and threats online.

Alongside this, independent journalists and researchers should continue to monitor and expose disinformation and propaganda, and harassment and threats against journalists, with a focus on female and non-binary journalists, and politically fragile countries.

News media globally have lost advertising revenue to internet tech platforms. To be able to hold power to account and report without fear or favour, new finance models must be developed by government, civil society and philanthropic bodies.

Urgent and decisive action is needed across the global political and media landscape. Our recommendations to proactively defend journalists and the freedom of the press also apply to others subject to extreme action online, whether political representatives, government officials, academics or any citizen standing up for human rights.

Credits

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Sources for factual assertions – except those below – can be found in the full report, available at journodefender.org.

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