Online harassment of U.S. women journalists and its impact on press freedom
by Caitlin Ring Carlson and Haley Witt

Abstract
This investigation aimed to determine whether and how online harassment affects U.S. women journalists. Of particular interest was whether online harassment creates a chilling effect by limiting the types of stories and topics that are covered, which may influence press freedom. The survey \( n=141 \) indicated that negative online interactions caused most participants to feel dissatisfied with their jobs. A chilling effect on coverage was also evident in responses from participants. Some respondents avoided certain stories for fear of online abuse they would receive. An overwhelming majority of U.S. women journalists (79 percent) agreed that online harassment affected press freedom. In the United States, a free and fair press is an essential component of our democracy. This study found that online harassment prevents women journalists from serving in their capacity as a watchdog on government and other institutions.

Contents

Introduction
Literature review
Method
Findings
Discussion
Conclusion

Introduction

Enduring harassment from anonymous posters or “trolls” online has become an informal part of the job description for many women working in journalism. From negative comments about a story posted to their news organization’s Web page to offensive posts on their personal social media, many women journalists in the United States must navigate online harassment as they attempt to engage with their readers and viewers online. According to Amnesty International (2017), women politicians and journalists in the United States and the United Kingdom received an average of one abusive tweet every 30 seconds. The study also found that Twitter abuse disproportionately affects women of color. Black women were 84 percent more likely than white women to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets (Amnesty International, 2017). A 2019 survey of female and gender non-conforming journalists indicated that online harassment was seen as the biggest threat or safety issue by 90 percent of U.S. respondents (Westcott, 2019).

Anecdotal evidence from U.S. women journalists further illuminates the nature of this harassment. During
the 2016 U.S. presidential election, women journalists covering opponents of Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders were targeted online by young men who, as a group, came to be collectively known as the “Bernie Bros.” One among their ranks, Daniel Kohn, tweeted the following statement to veteran NPR reporter, Tamara Keith: “Good job lying about the primary you dumb c*nt” (Borchers, 2016).

Reporter Janell Ross (2016), with the *Washington Post*, wrote about the hateful tweets, comments, and e-mail messages she received in response to her coverage of Bernie Sanders during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Despite the progressive stance taken by many Bernie Sanders supporters, Ross said that the messages directed at her told a different story, highlighting the intersecting issues women of color must deal with. Ross was subjected to misogynistic hate speech, as well as race-based insults.

“They use a variety of curse words and insults typically reserved for women. More than one has suggested that I deserve to become the victim of a sex crime. They critique the ‘objectivity’ of what is clearly political analysis based on polling data and other facts; they insist that black voters are dumb or that I have a personal obligation to help black voters see the error of their Clinton-voting ways. It is vile” (Ross, 2016).

In light of the potential harm this kind of abuse can inflict upon women journalists, several organizations have begun to offer solutions to deal with the issue. For example, the University of Missouri School of Journalism is developing an app called JSafe, which aims to help female journalists looking for support (Tameez, 2020). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2020) has released a ‘Journalist Safety Kit,’ which includes recommendations for dealing with online harassment, trolling, doxing, etc. The Organization for Security and Co-operation of Europe (OSCE, 2017) has spearheaded the Safety of Female Journalists Online campaign (#SOFJO), which is now in its fifth year (Newman, *et al.*, 2017). The project connects journalists and academics to share their experiences and resources for combating online hate speech and harassment.

While the work of these organizations begins to offer potential solutions to address the problem of online harassment, the majority of these efforts, with the possible exception of the SOFJO campaign, place the burden of fixing the issue on the journalists themselves rather than on the news organizations that employ them. This study aims to understand how women journalists are affected by this harassment and what they believe should be done and by whom to address the issue. Moreover, additional insight is still needed regarding whether and how online harassment influences press freedom. This study seeks to better understand whether this type of harassment creates a chilling effect that silences women journalists or limits freedom of the press in some way. In the United States, the First Amendment prohibits restrictions on press freedom. However, it is unclear what affect online harassment has on journalists’ ability to engage in this protected activity. Does it influence the stories women journalists cover? The sources they use?

Lack of newsroom diversity is already a critical issue. According to industry research conducted by the Women’s Media Center (2019), women of color represented just 7.9 percent of U.S. traditional newspaper staff, 12.6 percent of local TV news staff, and 6.2 percent of local radio staff. Understanding this problem is essential to ensure that the voices of women journalists, and female journalists of color, in particular, can reach the public sphere where they set the agenda regarding important issues and offer the frames used to interpret current events (Dietram, 2000). This paper presents the results of a survey of women journalists in the United States (*n* = 141). This exploratory study uses descriptive statistics to understand the scope and nature of this problem. The goal of this research is not to establish causal links between variables. Instead, our objective is to learn more about the extent to which women journalists in the U.S. encounter online harassment and the impact of those interactions on their reporting. We employ a feminist methodological lens to investigate this issue to create situational knowledge (Haraway, 1991) that can be used to improve women’s lives (Reinharz, 1983). This study also seeks to understand the intersectional issues associated with the racist and misogynistic harassment directed at journalists of color.

To begin, we present existing research regarding online harassment of women journalists, along with a
Online harassment of U.S. women journalists and its impact on press freedom

working definition of press freedom. Next, we consider how online harassment might chill speech and explore the responsibility of online news sites and social media organizations to police expression. Our discussion of the results examines how press freedom and online harassment are intertwined and concludes with recommendations for news agencies to take to minimize the amount of hate and harassment directed at U.S. women journalists.

Literature review

Across the world, women journalists are harassed in person and online. In newsrooms, sexual harassment continues to be pervasive and could have implications for news coverage and job satisfaction (North, 2016). In many countries, women who cover the news must deal with rape and death threats and have physical acts of violence perpetrated against them (Barton and Storm, 2014). While sexual harassment in the newsroom remains a pervasive problem in the United States, this investigation’s focus is the harassment of women journalists that occurs online.

Online harassment of women

The anonymity afforded by the Internet means people can express misogyny with little personal cost. According to legal scholar Danielle Keats Citron (2011), “cyber gender harassment” has a set of core features. These include the fact that the victims are female, the harassment is aimed at particular women, and the abuse invokes the victims’ gender in sexually threatening and degrading ways (Citron, 2011). Cyber gender harassment often involves a perfect storm of threats, doctored photographs, privacy invasions, lies, and technical sabotage (Citron, 2011).

What Citron (2011) describes as cyber gender harassment, feminist scholar Karla Mantilla (2013) calls gendertrolling. More threatening than traditional trolling, gendertrolling is characterized by the following features: Coordinated and intense attacks by numerous people, gender-based insults, reactions to women speaking out, vicious language describing acts to be committed by the trolls, and finally, credible death, rape, and other threats. According to Mantilla (2013), gendertrolling has a lot in common with different offline ways of targeting women, such as sexual harassment in the workplace and street harassment. In those areas, as is the case with gendertrolling, the harassment is about “patrolling gender boundaries and using insults, hate, and threats, of violence and/or rape to ensure that women and girls are either kept out of or play subservient roles in, male-dominated arenas” [1].

Notably, social media platforms based in the United States are not responsible for the comments posted to their sites. Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act exempts social media providers from being treated as the publisher of any information provided by users [2]. Although state and federal laws prohibit harassment and threats, comments, and posts must threaten bodily injury or property damage to meet the threshold established by these statutes [3]. It is also important to note that news organizations and other private Web sites, such as social media platforms, are not bound by the First Amendment and are free to regulate expression on their platforms in any way they see fit.

Online harassment of women journalists

Some of the most comprehensive work on this issue comes from Chen, et al. (2018). They interviewed 75 professional women journalists from Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States to understand whether and how online harassment affects their ability to do their jobs. The researchers also wanted to know which strategies these women used to prevent harassment or deal with it once it occurred. Most of the journalists interviewed reported experiencing negative audience feedback that went beyond a critique of their work to target them personally, focusing on their gender or sexuality (Chen, et al., 2018). The journalists said that these attacks were most potent when they covered stories on topics most often
associated with men, such as video games or automobiles (Chen, et al., 2018). Controversial issues such as immigration, race, feminism, or politics also elicited a higher amount of abuse (Chen, et al., 2018).

Journalists from India, the U.K., and the U.S. said that they felt intense pressure to engage online and therefore had no choice but to face harassment. The strategies they employed to deal with this issue included blocking comments containing certain words, such as “sexy,” “hot,” or “boobs” (Chen, et al., 2018). Some respondents talked about the need for a thick skin, while others felt it was essential to have colleagues to rely on for support, which they thought they did not receive from their managers or news organizations (Chen, et al., 2018). Notably, some respondents reported shifting how they covered news to prevent harassment. A reporter from Taiwan, for example, said that she focused on positive news to avoid attacks. A TV reporter in the U.S. said that she avoided including upsetting details in her stories. These findings are among the most troubling in the report because they indicate that this problem is changing how women journalists cover the news, affecting the public’s understanding of important issues.

A subsection of that study focusing on women journalists in Taiwan was published as a standalone piece in *Journalism Practice*. Here, Pain and Chen (2018) found that many of the negative online comments reporters received focused on sex. Reporters were regularly called “slut,” and one was even asked whether she had considered becoming a porn star. Other negative comments focused on the reporter’s appearance, which viewers focused on more than the reporter’s ability. Terms such as “fat” and “ugly” were common, and a female reporter’s appearance was more likely to be criticized than her male counterparts.

In addition to understanding how online harassment affects women reporters generally, researchers have also begun to investigate how a reporter’s beat or medium of reporting influences their online interactions with audience members. Catherine Adams’ (2017) work focuses specifically on online harassment of women journalists covering technology. Adams surveyed 102 women journalists and then performed a qualitative content analysis on their comments. She found that 40 percent of the abuse women reported occurred online, either in the comments section of a news story or on social media (Adams, 2017). Notably, participants in this study indicated that they self-censored in response to this abuse, which raises serious concerns regarding the impact online harassment has on press freedom and media coverage of critical issues (Adams, 2017). Adams’ (2017) analysis revealed that some women would stop writing, go anonymous, or avoid engaging with a particular audience as a way of coping. These findings echo the work of Stine Eckert (2018), who interviewed 109 bloggers in Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States who wrote about feminism or maternity politics. Three-quarters of the bloggers interviewed had negative experiences online, ranging from negative comments to rape and death threats (Eckert, 2018).

Women working in sports journalism are also disproportionately exposed to online harassment (Antunovic, 2019; Everbach, 2018). The introduction of the 2016 #morethanmean campaign, which launched with a video featuring men reading back abusive tweets to women sports journalists in-person and then discussing their reactions, sought to draw attention to this issue. Despite efforts like this to bring awareness to the problem, women in this male-dominated field are subject to threatening and abusive online harassment that causes them severe distress (Everbach, 2018). Interviews with prestigious sports journalists indicated that the harassment they endured online caused them to doubt themselves because their qualifications and work product were constantly being challenged (Everback, 2018).

Not only does the beat or topic covered by a woman reporter seem to influence her treatment online, so does the medium she works in. Broadcast journalists receive a disproportionate number of online comments that focus heavily on their appearance, including their weight, hairstyle, and overall beauty (Chen, et al., 2018). An analysis of television anchor’s social media pages suggested that women broadcast journalists experience psychological and monetary harm due to the online audience interaction their jobs now require (Finneman, et al., 2018).

Women reporters of color must navigate gender and race issues in their online interactions with audience members. When asked about online harassment, Rewire legal journalist Imani Gandy said, “I don’t know how any woman of color can have their D.M.s open”[4]. When Gandy publishes a piece she knows will go
viral or press buttons, she activates Twitter’s “quality filter” to only see comments and replies from people she follows (Peterson, 2018). The work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) describes how the “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” [5]. Anti-racist and Feminist scholarship often looks at discrimination through the lens of its most privileged groups, which marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims of discrimination that cannot be understood as resulting from these discrete sources [6]. Therefore, this inquiry pays close attention to how online harassment uniquely burdens women reporters of color. It is clear from anecdotal reports that women journalists in the United States are experiencing online harassment and that the volume and impact of this abuse are greater on journalists of color.

Research conducted thus far about the online harassment of women journalists provides valuable insights into the problem’s scope and nature. We know that the topic, beat, or medium a journalist is working in, and their race can lead to more considerable attention and harassment from audience members and Internet trolls. This study seeks to build on existing research to understand how online harassment affects women journalists personally and professionally. Of primary concern is whether or not this harassment creates a chilling effect that prevents women reporters from covering specific issues, thereby limiting freedom of the press in the U.S.

**Defining press freedom**

In the United States, the First Amendment prohibits Congress from creating laws that abridge the freedom of speech or of the press. However, it is not always clear what, exactly, press freedom entails, especially in light of the burgeoning online journalism landscape (Allen, 2015). Centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson argued that a free press was an essential component of a functioning democracy. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1975) said that the press’s role was as a fourth estate focused on keeping tabs on legislators. According to Stewart, the primary purpose of a free press’s constitutional guarantee was to “create a fourth institution outside the Government as an additional check on the three official branches’ [7]. The free press, said Potter, guarantees organized, expert scrutiny of government [8]. According to James Curran (2005), the primary democratic tasks of the media are “to inform, scrutinize, debate, and present” [9]. In the United States, there are very few prior restraints on journalists to limit what issues they can report on and how. Unless expression threatens national security, calls for the foreseeable overthrow of the government, obstructs military recruitment, is obscene, contains fighting words, or incites violence, the government may not silence it before it has been published [10]. The concern raised by online harassment is that it places an unnecessary restraint on women journalists, prohibiting them from covering issues or topics that may yield negative online responses from the audience.

**How online harassment creates a chilling effect**

According to legal scholar Frederick Schauer, a chilling effect occurs when “individuals seeking to engage in activity protected by the First Amendment are deterred from doing so by governmental regulation not specifically directed at that protected activity” [11]. Today, however, censorship occurs less through explicit state policy than through official and unofficial privileging of dominant groups and viewpoints (MacKinnon, 1993). This is accomplished through silencing in many forms (MacKinnon, 1993).

Here, we hypothesize that online harassment, insults, and other vitriol directed at women journalists negatively impacts their ability to do their jobs effectively by creating a chilling effect in which these women attempt to engage in their job but are prohibited or prevented from doing so because of the self-censorship that happens in response to the negative comments they receive online.

In *Hate crimes in cyber space*, Danielle Keats Citron (2014) explored the relationship between online hate speech and democratic participation. Here Keats Citron argued that online harassment makes it difficult for those targeted to engage in the process of digital citizenship, which includes the exchange of ideas that takes place online. According to Citron (2014), cyber harassment does little to enhance the vision of self-governance described by Alexander Meiklejohn (1960) in *Political freedom* and instead works to destroy it.
Online harassment of U.S. women journalists and its impact on press freedom

Victims cannot participate in their online networks if they are under assault from a barrage of gendered slurs.

Applying this concept to women journalists and their ability to engage their own networks, it seems plausible that the prevalence of online harassment limits their ability to be effective in their work by making it challenging to engage sources or readers or viewers. It may also create a deterrent from entering the field. This is incredibly problematic given the essential role journalists play in setting the public agenda and framing relevant issues (Scheufele, 2000). In the United States, our goal should be to have at least half of working journalists be women. As Donna Allen (1990) noted, the greater the diversity of information and opinions the public can hear and take into account, the more viable and long-lasting the resulting public decisions will be.

Far from promoting a diverse range of opinions, the prevalence of online abuse could silence women journalists. For example, in a study about the impact of hate speech on journalists in Norway, one participant reflected on all the stories that she could have told if it was not for the harassment she was regularly facing (Hagen, 2017). According to that research, the way journalists (regardless of gender) reacted to online threats or harassment over the longer term was dependent on how others handled the situation (Hagen, 2017). If they were ridiculed, ignored, or left to deal with the problem on their own, they were more deeply affected than if managers, editors, or the organization took responsibility [12]. Given this, we feel that exploring the role of the news organization in this process is also an essential component of this research.

To better understand how this online harassment affects U.S. women journalists and whether and how press freedom is affected by this phenomenon, this study seeks to answer the following research questions.

\[ RQ1: \text{What is the scope and nature of U.S. women journalists’ online interactions with audience members?} \]

\[ RQ2: \text{How do these interactions affect women journalists’ ability to do their jobs?} \]

\[ RQ3: \text{Does online harassment of U.S. women journalists affect press freedom?} \]

Method

To better understand how online harassment affects women journalists in the United States, a survey instrument was created and disseminated to digital, print, and broadcast journalists. The survey utilized a variety of question formats, including Likert scale, multiple-choice, and short answer questions. The survey’s design was intended to ensure data specificity while still allowing participants to provide long-form qualitative data. The questions were ordered by theme, beginning with participants’ job title and job expectations. The survey ended with questions about the nature of their online interactions with readers or viewers and the potential impacts of these user comments. The survey did not collect identifying information such as name, employer, or location. Participation in this survey was voluntary. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling technique. The survey was sent via e-mail to a variety of press agencies, publications, and individuals with the intent of soliciting participation.

Because journalists are highly-solicited individuals, the snowball sampling method was intended to improve overall response rates. As both researchers and “outsiders” to the industry, this sampling method was a strategic decision to task "insiders" with the continued distribution of the survey. This method was employed with the understanding that it would inhibit the generalizability of the survey and possibly...
influence various demographic results, including but not limited to geography, medium, beat, and race.

This survey’s goal was to understand the scope of the problem and determine whether and how online harassment affects press freedom in the United States. Therefore, descriptive statistics rather than inferential statistics were used. Since there is so little information about how online harassment influences U.S. women journalists and their work, it seemed premature to begin by measuring relationships between variables. Instead, descriptive statistics allowed us to determine how often women journalists encountered harassment, the nature of that harassment, and its impact on their work. This mixed-methods survey employs both qualitative and quantitative strategies constructed through a feminist methodological lens. Here, the survey instrument was utilized to look at the prevalence and distribution of a particular social problem, online harassment, to see whether and how it impacted participants’ ability to do their jobs as journalists (Reinharz, 1992). Rather than seeking traditional “objectivity,” the goal of this project was to develop situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991), which places agency on participants’ responses rather than the outcomes of statistical analysis. Instead of generalizability, the measure we used to judge the quality of the survey was its ability to improve women’s lives (Reinharz, 1983).

The results gathered were limited by a few key factors. The first and foremost was the disproportionate number of white respondents. As the findings will indicate, only 16 percent of respondents were women of color. This makes it difficult to understand how race and gender intersect around this issue. In addition, the survey regrettably did not ask journalists about the nature of their market and news outlet, so comparisons between large and small markets and print and broadcast outlets are limited.

Findings

The average age of respondents was 39.3, and the average time spent in the industry was 17 years. The majority of respondents were reporters (48 percent) followed by writers (22 percent) and editors (18 percent).

The majority of respondents in this survey were white. The breakdown of race/ethnicity among respondents is reported in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to answer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
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</table>
A majority of respondents in the study (94 percent) indicated that it was an expectation of their job to be on social media. The platforms most often used by these journalists as part of their work were Twitter and Facebook. The majority of respondents news organizations’ Web sites did publish comments (88 percent), and about one fifth (21 percent) of the women journalists surveyed said that they were expected to respond to audience comments on these sites.

The first research question asked about the nature of online interactions with audience members. When asked to describe their interactions with viewers or readers, most respondents said that these encounters were positive or neutral.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally positive</td>
<td>53.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally neutral</td>
<td>33.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally negative</td>
<td>12.93%</td>
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</table>

A qualitative follow-up to this question asked respondents to describe the nature of positive interactions. They reported receiving compliments on their work, story tips, and follow-up questions. When asked how this impacted their work, respondents said that these comments were encouraging and a morale booster.

“They’re encouraging and sometimes inspiring, particularly when someone tells me I’ve helped to change something (a policy, their own understanding of an issue, etc.) for the better.”

“They help a lot. It makes me feel like I’m doing a good job as well as have viewers who like me and what I’m doing.”

“They help me explore new ideas and avenues that hadn’t occurred to me.”

When asked which negative interactions they had experienced, the most popular answers were general insults, insults about their work, politics, and appearance. Specific identities most often attacked included participants’ age, appearance, race, and gender.

When respondents were asked how negative interactions affected their work, they gave a wide range of answers. Participants said the comments influenced their job satisfaction, their ability to focus, their self-esteem, caused frustration, anger, and made them shy away from certain topics or stories.

For example, some respondents said negative online comments upset job satisfaction by making work less enjoyable, causing them to question whether to remain in the profession.

“They are profoundly demoralizing and make me question whether it’s worth it to continue in this line of work, which pays poorly and has no job security already.”

“Even though I’m a professional, local, and national award-winning journalist, I’ve often thought of getting out of this business because of
Online harassment of U.S. women journalists and its impact on press freedom

negative online interactions. Life is too short.”

“It makes me want to flee the news business and never look back.”

They also reported that the comments made them question their own judgment.

“I try hard to ignore the online trolls. They get under my skin, however, as one of my colleagues says, they kind of mess with your mind and cause you to question your own judgment.”

“The attacks on social media haunt me and leave me in a constant inner monologue trying to defend myself.”

“Negative interactions can make me overly critical of my work and my views and can make me second guess my journalistic ethics. They can make me feel like I don’t belong.”

Many of the respondents also discussed how online comments affected their self-esteem, caused extreme anxiety, and even psychological harm.

“They give me huge anxiety. Negative interactions in person or on the phone are much more manageable for me. Sometimes I find myself not checking emails/social media when a big story has published simply because I can’t bear the horrible feelings that come with the comments. I always fear I’ll miss something crucial there because I couldn’t bring myself to look at what people are saying.”

“Make me feel lesser than human. I know I have to brace myself when writing about specific topics, like sexual assault or LGBTQ issues. When they are personal attacks, sometimes it is hard to brush them off, and they make me legitimately sad or angry.”

“An insulting or abusive comment, even a senseless one from someone who’s clearly, an idiot, can still be psychologically derailing on any given day, even for those of us who’ve been subjected to them for a decade or more.”

Other respondents expressed concern for their physical safety.

“They can be frightening. You assume they’re just words, but it’s hard to know for sure that the person won’t make an effort to seriously injure you at some point.”

“The negative interactions make me second-guess not just my work, but my safety and the safety of those around me.”

Some journalists said that the negative comments didn’t bother them, while others reported that it made them angry.

“I give no f*cks and take no sh*t.”
“It comes with the territory.”
“They don’t impact my work.”
“It just makes me angry.”
Makes me cranky.”
Other respondents expressed concern about how negative online interactions would upset their sources.

“I don’t take a lot of insults directed at me online, more about my story subjects. Especially in immigrant, refugee, or homeless populations. It really discourages subjects from coming forward and makes me feel terrible.”

Lastly, some respondents said that the negative comments they received online caused them to hesitate about covering certain stories or posting particular information online:

“They make me afraid to do the types of stories that elicit these types of interactions.”

“The most violent harassment makes me want to avoid writing about that topic again.”

“They are frustrating and sometimes make me not want to post certain things for fear of trolls attacking. Any time I post a story with a standup in it, I will receive comments on my appearance and not the work.”

To summarize, respondents reported several reactions to negative online comments, including feeling a decrease in job satisfaction, questioning their abilities and judgment, and feeling a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, and disappointment. They expressed concerns about how online comments affected sources and their willingness to come forward, and also had concerns regarding their physical safety. While some said journalists said that online harassment did not bother them, others said they hesitated when putting certain information online.

The second research question asked about how online interactions altering respondents’ ability to do their jobs effectively. When asked specifically whether online harassment influenced the stories they chose to cover and the sources they chose to use, the majority of participants said that they did not. However, half of the respondents (50.3 percent) agreed that online harassment affected job satisfaction.

To address the third and final research question about the impact of online harassment on press freedom, respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: “Online harassment impacts press freedom for women journalists in the United States.” An overwhelming majority (79 percent) responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

The survey concluded by asking respondents what, if anything, their news organizations did to manage comments online or on social media. Some participants said that their news organizations did nothing, while others said that Web filters or content moderators were used to remove sexually explicit or offensive language, as well as harassment or threats, from the news organization’s Web site. Some organizations even blocked repeat offenders. Notably, none of the respondents said that they received support from their organization to manage hateful or harassing comments that appeared on their personal social media pages.

Finally, participants were asked about the specific resources made available to them to manage online interactions with readers or viewers. These are presented in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational training</td>
<td>9%</td>
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Online harassment of U.S. women journalists and its impact on press freedom

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational policies</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-worker support</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
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</table>

When asked about the specific strategies they used to address the issue, some respondents said that they ignored any negative posts, while others responded only to constructive criticisms. Some participants said they used humor to diffuse the sting of the comments. In fact, one respondent said that she printed out the most vile comments she received online and posted them to her office door in an effort to deflate their negative impact on her.

**Discussion**

The first research question asked, “What is the nature of U.S. women journalists’ online interactions with audience members?” As the findings indicated, the majority of these experiences were positive or neutral. However, the negative interactions, about 13 percent, had a range of problematic effects on the reporters surveyed. Respondents said that these encounters caused them to feel dissatisfied in their jobs, question their own news judgment, feel anger, sadness, and anxiety, fear for their personal safety, and hesitate before covering controversial topics or posting certain information online. The mental pause being described by the respondents suggests that a chilling effect, which Schauer (1978) initially characterized as any deterrent against expression protected by the First Amendment, is, in fact, at play. As Catharine MacKinnon (1993) noted, censorship is the result of a confluence of factors that work to silence one group while privileging the voices of another. While many of the respondents here had the courage to overcome their hesitation and post potentially controversial stories or comments, living with that fear of reprisal seems to directly threaten the freedom of these members of the press and thus compromise their ability to serve as a watchdog on government and other institutions.

These findings also suggest that if U.S. women journalists are avoiding certain topics, there will be a disproportionate number of male voices commenting on controversial issues, such as immigration or abortion. Members of the media play an important role in shaping the public agenda, framing issues, and priming viewers about how to evaluate current events (Scheufele, 2000). Limiting women’s ability to participate in this process reshapes the universe of discourse in a skewed and problematic way.

The second research question asked about how online interactions influenced journalists’ ability to do their jobs. While most respondents said online harassment did not cause them to avoid specific stories or sources, a vast majority reported that online harassment caused them to be further dissatisfied with their already low-paying, often tenuous positions. This sense of discontent could cause women journalists to leave the field before retirement age or discourage young women from entering it all together. This could further limit the number of women’s voices in U.S. media. In 2019, women generated only 37 percent of bylines and other credits in U.S. print, Internet, TV, and wire news (Women’s Media Center, 2019). Having to deal with online harassment means that number is likely to decrease rather than increase in the coming years.

The third research question specifically asked respondents whether online harassment impacted press freedom for U.S. women journalists. An overwhelming majority (79 percent) said that it did. The findings in this survey suggest that online harassment has become a prior restraint on expression for U.S. women journalists and a threat to press freedom. Considering the vital role U.S. media plays as a watchdog on government and other institutions, this fact is extremely troubling. Online harassment is negatively
changing women’s ability to investigate and report on issues that affect our democracy, which in turn affects the choices we as voters will make.

Given this, news organizations should act now to protect women journalists and limit the influence this issue has on their ability to report the news. One possibility for media organizations to consider is disabling the comments feature altogether or, at the very least, doing more to moderate and remove offensive content. Some publications purposefully choose not to allow comments on their site to protect their contributors and other writers from online hate. Other organizations allow reporters to decide whether to enable or disable the comment feature on each of their own stories. Also interesting is the Denver Post’s approach, which requires readers to answer a few simple questions regarding the website’s community guidelines before being able to post. Another easy solution would be to require commenters on news organization’s websites to link their profile to their real identity through a verified email address or Facebook account. As Citron (2011) noted, the anonymity of the Internet breeds misogyny. By requiring commenters to identify themselves, news organizations may be able to minimize the amount of sexual, racist, or otherwise offensive comments women journalists have to deal with.

Along these lines, the survey found that women journalists were expected to be on social media, but that their organizations provided little support for them to monitor content on those platforms. One way to minimize the amount of online harassment U.S. women journalists face and its subsequent impact on press freedom would be for news organizations to lessen the expectation that women journalists interact with audience members via social media. Also, since women journalists in this survey identified supervisor and co-worker support as the most useful resource for dealing with online harassment, which echoes the previous findings of Chen, et al. (2018), news organizations could invest opportunities for women journalists to get together to support one another by sharing their experiences and strategies for dealing with this issue. These strategies included ignoring all negative posts, responding only to those including constructive criticism, and using humor to deflate the impact of the comments they received.

Whichever approach they decide to pursue, news organizations should act quickly and aggressively to minimize the amount of online harassment women journalists are exposed to in order to avoid a chilling effect and promote press freedom. Failing to do so will only serve to further limit the number of women’s voices in the U.S. public sphere.

Future research into this issue should further investigate how online harassment affects the work of journalists of color in particular. The small sample size in this survey made it difficult to draw any substantial conclusions. It would also be interesting to learn more about the different ways print and broadcast journalists and journalists from small and large markets experience this problem. Additional research is also needed to measure the success of different solutions for tackling this issue.

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**Conclusion**

The results of this survey make several things very clear. First is the fact that many women journalists in the United States must regularly deal with negative online comments, threats, or sexualized remarks from their audience. Oftentimes these comments are focused on the story or the reporter’s perceived politics. Other times, it is the journalist’s gender, race, age, or other immutable characteristics that are being attacked. This study contributes to the existing literature by expanding our understanding of how these sexual or sometimes misogynistic comments make women reporters hesitate before posting and even question their own judgment. This works to silence women journalists and, in doing so, threatens the freedom of the press in the United States. Moreover, the online abuse women journalists must deal with leads to greater job dissatisfaction, which could further limit the number of women in the field.

The limited results of this survey can only capture an array of individual, non-generalizable anecdotes.
However, echoes of the same findings can be found in interviews with women journalists — especially those covering high-intensity beats. In a May 2020 interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists, *New York Times* reporter Davey Alba shares her experience covering the disinformation beat for COVID-19. Alba shares that online harassment was targeted at her identity as a Filipina woman, “I got a lot of, ‘Go back to the Philippines,’ and ‘We don’t want you here.’ A lot of really nasty anti-immigrant, anti-woman, anti-everything comments.” However, she also echoes the importance of having a community to share this experience with, “I think that talking about it openly, especially after time has gone by, is really helpful. It’s getting power back from this whole incident.” (Westcott, 2019)

In response to harassment, many news organizations do nothing, while some offer training or have policies in place to handle this online vitriol. In the future, news organizations should prioritize women journalists’ voices over those of online commenters and remove the comments feature altogether. Other potential solutions include limiting anonymity or more aggressively moderating Web sites and social media content. Regardless of the approach selected, news organizations should act to protect the voices of women journalists in the United States.

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**Notes**


7. Stewart, 1975, p. 634.


9. Curran, 2005, p. 120.


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