

Online abuse against female journalists: A scoping review

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Abstract

The Internet and digital technologies have delivered countless benefits to journalism. However, they also raised new opportunities to attack journalists with impunity, especially female journalists, impacting their credibility and affecting women's public participation. This chapter draws on feminist thinking and presents a review of impactful research on online abuse against female journalists published in the last decade in the Web of Science database. To provide a quantitative and qualitative assessment of relevant literature on the subject, we combined a meta-analysis with content analysis. Results show the relative increasing importance of the issue and the recognition of widespread abuse toward female professionals, despite the phenomenon's detrimental normalisation. The research also offers critical insights into the cross-contextual – online and offline – of the harmful practices and how to counter online abuse and improve the democratic potential of public conversation. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to fully understand this phenomenon' nature, prevalence, and impact on democratic societies.

Keywords

Online abuse, online harassment, women journalist, meta-analysis

1. Introduction¹

The Internet and digital technologies have delivered countless benefits to journalism, from facilitating contact with information sources to enhancing the interaction with the public. However, technology affordances and self-publishing opportunities offer people unprecedented opportunities to attack journalists with impunity. Female journalists reporting on socially controversial issues, in particular, seem to have increasingly been the target of harmful behaviours. These behaviours perpetuate social embedded gender prejudices and stereotypes, besides causing individual and personal impacts.

Indeed, in the digital realm, individual persons and groups have used the freedom to participate online to engage in hateful or discriminatory communicative practices, often hiding behind anonymity (Papacharissi, 2004). These harmful practices are widespread and are highly visible, given the persistent, searchable, and accessible content shared through digital platforms (boyd, 2010).

Sometimes, online abuse happens in the form of a backlash movement against women's public life participation (Massanari, 2017). Other times, beyond these reactionary movements, high profile women, including journalists, are subjected to online abuse uniquely mediated and expressed via the Internet but intrinsically related to offline behaviours (Citron, 2014). Hence, despite their potential to render visible power relations and diverse forms of discrimination, digital platforms frequently reify the ideological dynamics that structure the offline world and systemic gender-based violence.

While men journalists are also frequent targets of online abuse, harmful content directed at women is gendered in nature. Women are under the same dangers all journalists work, but are also "targeted for the simple fact they are women taking on a public role" (Chocarro, 2019:9). Therefore, online abuse, rather than being an individual problem, is a complex social issue that impacts the public sphere, online and offline, and effects media freedom.

Despite violence targeting female journalists being often underreported (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018), thanks to the #metoo movement, a diverse range of harmful practices,

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including online abuse, came to the spotlight in recent years (Idås, Orgeret & Backholm, 2020). Also, research has pointed to the dramatic increases and widespread venom, slurs and threats targeting female journalists on the Internet and social media (Mijatović, 2016; Chocarro, 2019). Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a quantitative and qualitative assessment of impactful scientific knowledge produced on online abuse against female journalists to help inform future research, practices, and policies. Drawing on feminist thinking, we conducted this assessment guided by the following questions: To what extent has this issue being seen has a relevant study object? What data analysis and research methods have been used to study it? What is the scope of online abuse within the literature, and what are the primary research outcomes?

2. Research design

To answer the above questions, we combined a meta-analysis with a content analysis of research published between 2010 and 2020 on the Web of Science database. A computer-based search was conducted to identified relevant studies using a range of keywords combinations to give us a semi-exhaustive, representative set of relevant articles (online abuse, online harassment, online hate, journalism, journalist, female, women). In total, we retrieved 13 texts, which were exported to a reference manager (Zotero) for further investigation. All were included in the analysis. These 13 papers were carefully submitted to an annotated individual reading by each author. They were then coded by the authors together using a coding book with a purposive set of variables focusing on the conceptual approach, methods, and outcomes.

3. Findings

As Figure 1 shows, we found that online abuse against women has attracted a relative increase in interest from 2010 onwards, confirming the scientific importance of conducting studies on the issue. The year in which the first text that met the inclusion criteria was published was 2015. Eight studies of the sample were published in the last two years, four in 2019 and four in 2020.

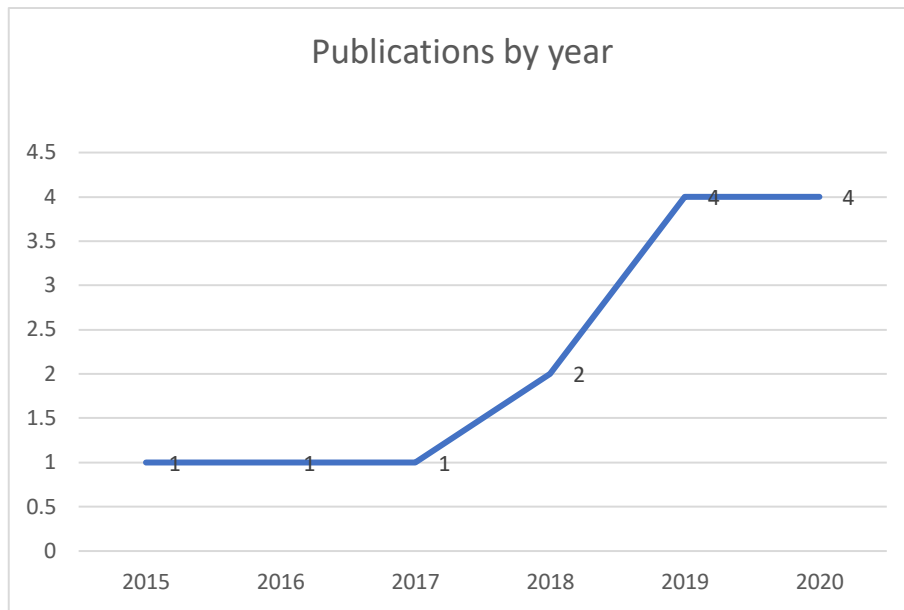


Figure 1. Publications by year. Own elaboration

As for the countries on which research is focusing, we found little diversity. The research was conducted mostly in the Western context (United States, United Kingdom, and European countries). Two papers focus on Asian countries, in which the sociopolitical and legal contexts differ widely from the Western liberal context.

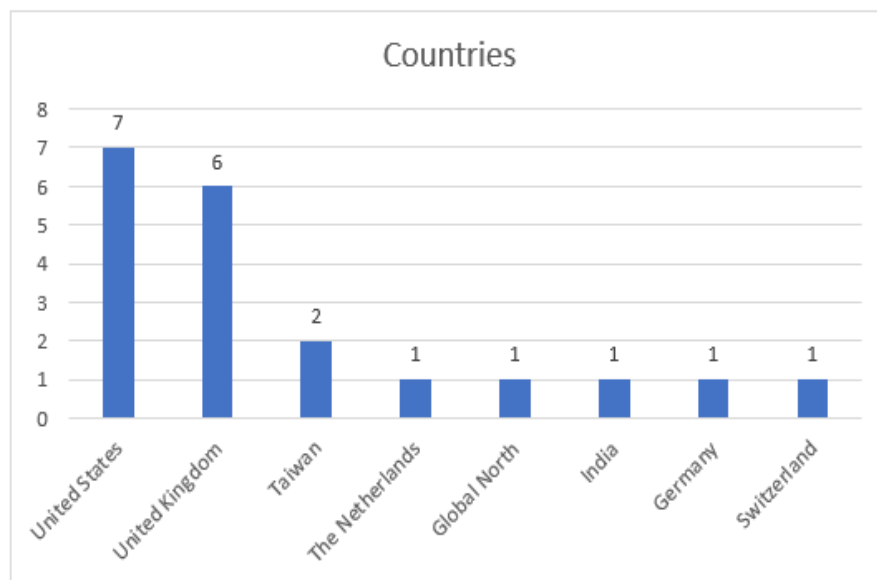


Figure 2. Research by country. Own elaboration

The qualitative focus of the research collected is more dominant, as shown in Figure 3.

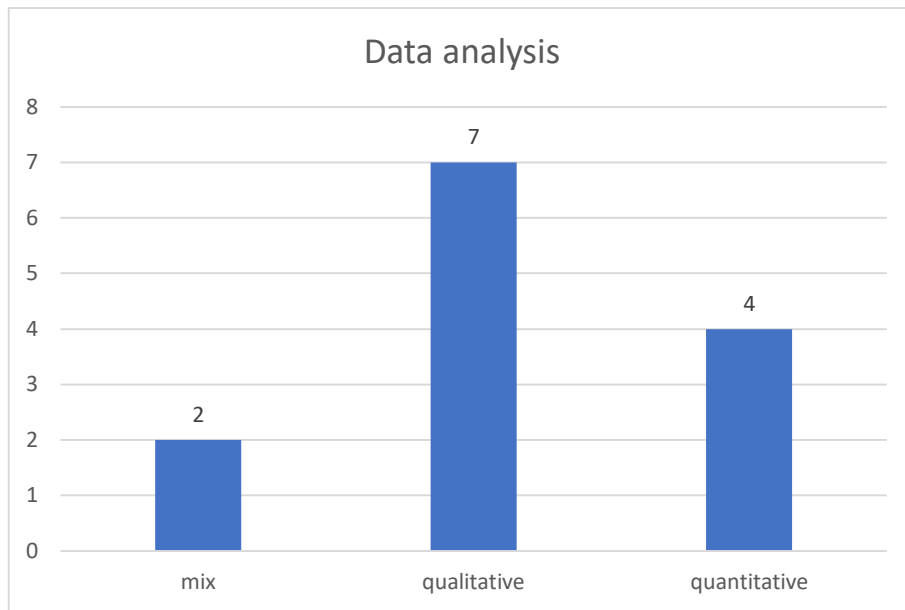


Figure 3. Data analysis. Own elaboration

Regarding the types of methods, we found a diverse range of qualitative research methods, ranging from in-depth interviews to case studies, as represented in Figure 4. Surveys were also used, pointing to some investment in finding trends and gathering evidence of online abuse prevalence.

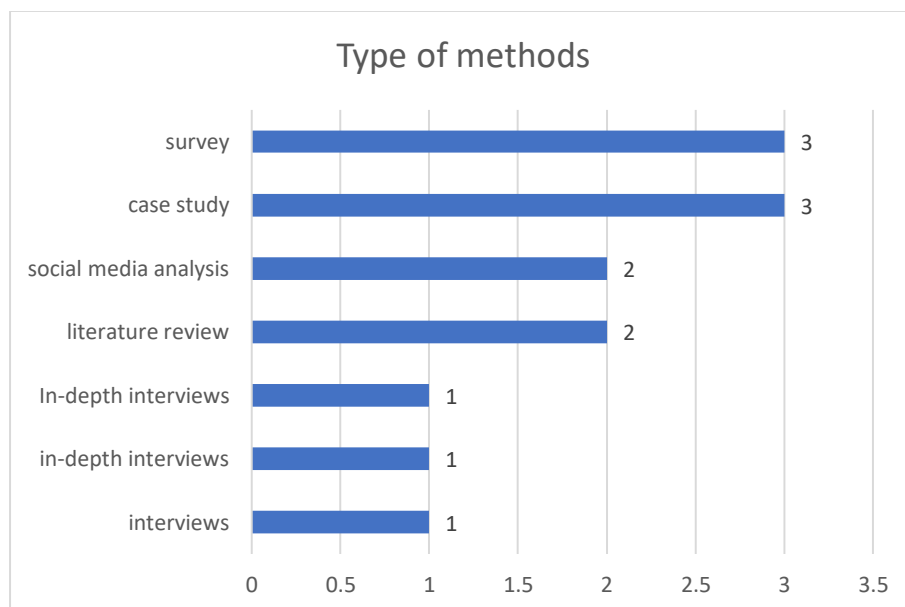


Figure 4. Type of methods. Own elaboration

The primary outcomes identified, briefly described in Table 1, highlight the importance of online abuse's cross-context (online and offline). Women are more likely than men to report receiving insults or threats and have stronger emotional reactions to abuse. Research shows that women experience problems offline and online due to fear of abuse, including leaving jobs and self-censoring (Binns, 2017), change their interactions with the audience (Chen et al., 2020), and struggle to be impartial conveyors of information (Lewis, Zamith, & Coddington, 2020). Moreover, some studies point to this phenomenon's frequent normalisation, with public expressions of it as a minor problem (Gardiner, 2017; Pain & Chen, 2019). Further, some offer insights into how to mitigate this problem (Chen et al., 2020; Miller & Lewis, 2020).

Studies	Main outcomes
Evans & Janish, 2015	#GamerGate, the online harassment of women journalists, showed that misogyny and harassment are a lived experience that impacts everyday routines and practice.
Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016	Sexually aggressive language, including rape threats, via Twitter, are harmful and productive, given that they trigger discourse communities in response to hatred harms.
Binns, 2017	Women are more likely than men to report receiving insults or threats and have stronger emotional reactions to abuse. Many described serious problems offline and online due to fear of abuse, including leaving jobs and self-censoring.
Gardiner, 2018	Media texts written by women and people of colour attract a disproportionate amount of abusive and dismissive comments online, regardless of their subject.
Adams, 2018	Women journalists writing about technology often experience abuse, many have changed their working practices, and some have disguised their identity to avoid it. Abuse is now normalised, alongside a new kind of "invisible" feminism
Stahel & Schoen, 2019	Female journalists are more likely than male journalists to use avoidance strategies as a reaction to online attacks.

Pain & Chen, 2019	Women journalists found that gendered harassment online and incivility in the digital sphere are important issues with which they have to contend. Comments are openly uncivil and abusive, primarily focus on their looks and physical attributes, affecting everyday journalistic routines and prevented them from being impartial conveyors of information.
Antunovic, 2019	By analysing the flow of a digital media campaign on harassment against women in sports journalism, this study shows how mainstream media recapped the campaign and mentioned the issue but omitted discussions of collective change and initiatives to empower women.
Bordalejo, 2019	The article elucidates the reasons why an online mob mentality can overrule social boundaries and shows how hatred is directed mostly at individuals who stand at the intersection of several marginalised groups.
Chen et al., 2020	Harassment disrupts the practice of reciprocal journalism because it limits how much women journalists can interact with the audience in mutually beneficial ways without being attacked or undermined sexually. Experiences of harassment are consistent across countries with different sociocultural contexts, but cultural differences are evident in how much the journalists are expected to engage online
Miller & Lewis, 2020	Women perform a significant degree of emotional labour as they regularly deal with harassment and simultaneously attempt to mitigate or prevent further abusive behaviours.
Lewis, Zamith, & Coddington, 2020	Online harassment against journalists disproportionately affects women and those who are more personally visible in the news. It affects the way that journalists think about and act toward their audiences.
Tromble & Koole, 2020	Impersonal and anonymous communication online often invites negativity and abuse, including racism and sexism.

Table 1. Studies by main outcomes. Own elaboration

Throughout the literature reviewed, there were recurring references to the harmful content by using different expressions. As shown in Figure 5, there was a broad acceptance of online harassment and online abuse concepts. However, there was also diversity in the terminology used.

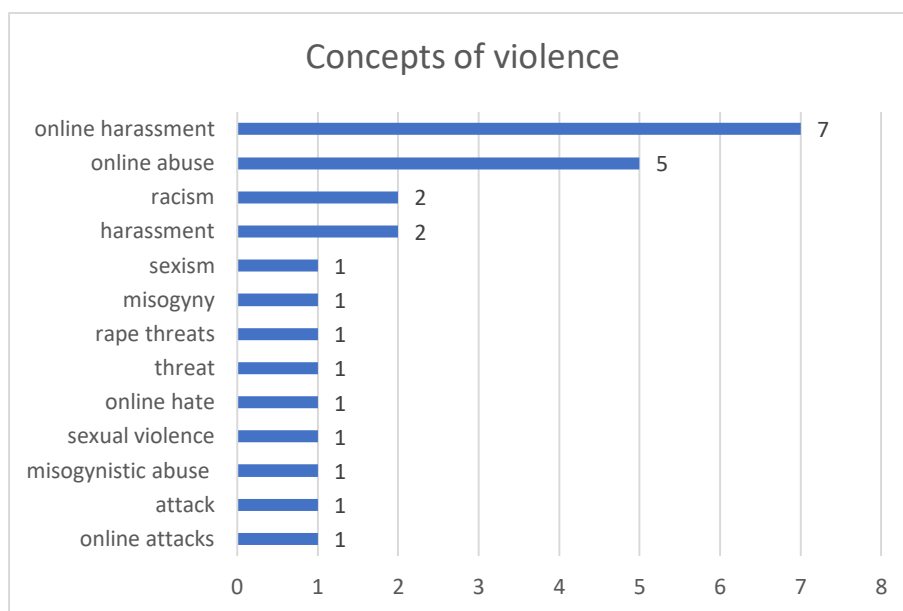


Figure 5. Concepts most used. Own elaboration

The top keywords used were "online", "gender", "harassment", "journalists", and "journalism", as shown by Figure 6.



Figure 6. Word cloud with keywords most used. Own elaboration

We also identified the number of citations when articles were cited. As Table 2 shows, the most cited article to date is the study by Hardaker and McGlashan (2016) on Twitter rape threats and group identity.

Studies	Number of citations
Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016	42
Chen et al, 2020	20
Gardiner, 2018	14
Binns, 2017	9
Evans & Janish, 2015	8
Adams, 2018; Miller & Lewis, 2020; Pain & Chen, 2019	6
Antunovic, 2019	5
Stahel & Schoen, 2019	3
Lewis, Zamith & Coddington, 2017; Tromble & Koole, 2020	1

Table 2: Studies by citations. Own elaboration

4. Discussion

Impactful research published in the last decade in Web of Science illustrates that online abuse is widespread, and women journalists experience it through a range of harmful practices. Most of the studies highlight how public commentary on social media encourages nasty conversation, impacting hard women journalists, besides affecting newsroom practices, as "Reciprocal journalism" through the interaction with audiences and perceptions of women authors' credibility (Chen et al., 2020). Evidence has also shown that online abuse is reported as more aggressive for women journalists when they perform activities that have historically been associated with male, namely in programming or gaming (Evans & Janish, 2015).

Focusing on how British journalists receive online abuse, Binns (2017) found that few professionals claim to have no experience of it. Focusing on female journalists who work or have worked in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, Chen and colleagues (2020) reveal that female journalists face extensive online gendered harassment that impact how they perform their jobs. Through qualitative interviews with women journalists from diverse media markets, Miller and Lewis (2020) noted that abuse aimed at women is constant and aggressive, jumping from the net to the street. Journalists admit that harassment occurs monthly, weekly, and even daily. It has a physically, verbally, in-person, and online expression and thus, it is a normalised, regular

occurrence for women (Miller & Lewis, 2020:8). Although less often, women journalists are also targeted offline. For Adams (2018), this "old-fashioned way" of targeting women means trying to belittle work, mocking business meetings, sending abusive letters, or even phone calls threats.

Frequently, research highpoints that online abuse is a gender problem. While men can be attacked, men usually don't receive "obscene pictures" when the public does not like their reporting. As a female journalist interviewed by Chen and colleagues (2020:883) stated: "My men colleagues get trolled, but they don't often get pictures of breasts or penises like we do". Also, men and women differ regarding their reactions to online abuse. There are three types of strategies that men and women use to tackle online abuse: avoiding reading comments, adapt their reporting behaviour and considering quitting the profession. It turns out that women journalists resort to the avoidance strategy more often because they are more attacked than men (Stahel, & Schoen, 2019), namely of harmful practices of a sexual nature (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016).

Women also seem to receive attacks more emotionally, namely feeling culpable, a sentiment that triggers a more discreet behaviour or a complete withdrawal from social media to avoid offensive and disturbing comments. For female journalists working in Taiwan, online sexual harassment is highly normalised and disturbing. "Slut" is the most common negative comment they came across (Pain & Chen, 2019:148). Avoiding harmful content is also seen as an expected gender behaviour. Female professionals often get the offline-based advice "serious woman has no hears" in the form of: "do not feed the trolls" (Antunovic, 2019).

Commentary, though, is part of journalists' routines (Pain & Chen, 2019). From a representative survey of U.S. journalists, Lewis, Zamith and Coddington (2020) conclude that it is difficult for a journalist to stay out of the digital realm when reciprocal journalism is encouraged to reinforce public trust in the profession. However, reader's comments are full of hatred content, most often affecting female writers (Gardiner, 2018), in an environment still marked by the lack of regulation (Tromble & Koole 2020).

For women journalists, this means their public voice devaluation. Adams (2018) points out potential losses in the domain of technology news practice. The loss of opportunities, rights and freedom by the marginalisation of women journalists in the media industry. Besides, online abuse can impact democracy and society by affecting journalism.

5. Conclusions

This chapter presented what impactful research has been done to date to address online abuse against female journalists. We considered research published in Web of Science between 2010 and 2020, and this, of course, limited our results. They show the relative increasing importance of this issue in the last five years in a set of studies which, overall, recognise female professionals' widespread abuse, despite the phenomenon's detrimental normalisation. Research also offers critical insights into the cross-contextual – online and offline – of the harmful practices, even though it does not share a common terminological framework to define these practices. This can pose problems regarding comparative efforts to investigate and counter online abuse.

Notably, research illustrates that when female journalists' voices come under attack repeatedly and disturbing, we must ask not if gender affects harmful digital practices, but how exactly gender shapes it and with what consequences to journalism practices and society. However, there is a lack of diversity in the situational contexts being studied, at least as far as our data collection method allowed us to go. Indeed, we need impactful research focusing on non-Western contexts in order to relate online abuse to different spheres of hostility in society and with media freedom and free expression online and offline in those contexts.

We have now impactful research on online abuse against journalists, using diverse methods to investigate hateful content and its reception. This is a sign of the recognition of the problem's importance. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to fully understand this phenomenon's nature, prevalence, and impact on journalism and gender justice. We encourage research from a feminist intersectional perspective, which means taking into account how online abuse against female journalists is produced and received according to different identity performances and situations.

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