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DOI

[10.1080/17512786.2024.2387664](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2387664)

Publication date

2026

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journalism Practice

License

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Citation for published version (APA):

Dodds, T., Geboers, M., & Boukes, M. (2026). “It became no man’s land”: The burden of moderating online harassment in newswork. *Journalism Practice*, 20(3), 953-970. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2387664>

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“It Became No Man’s Land”: The Burden of Moderating Online Harassment in Newswork

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ABSTRACT

Online harassment against media workers has been on the rise, prompting academic and international organizations to call for comprehensive measures that could protect journalists from intimidation and threats on social media platforms. Despite these efforts, research shows little success in curbing the issue of hostility towards media professionals. With this article, we aim to explore journalists’ perceptions regarding online harassment and the responsibility that they attribute to the media organizations they work for, as well as digital platforms for allowing violence to spread online. Our study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two Chilean newsrooms, including interviews with media professionals responsible for moderating hate. This article discusses the experiences of reporters who have faced online threats and attacks while reporting the news. Our findings show that digital platforms have provided new opportunities for violent behavior against journalists. More remarkably, some journalists are worried that their media organizations might prefer to benefit from the increased engagement and metrics that come with such aggressive actions. Our findings shed light on the challenges journalists face in the digital age and the need for more significant protection measures.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 September 2023
Accepted 29 July 2024

KEYWORDS

Harassment; digital violence; journalism; attacks toward the press; social media; newsroom ethnography

Introduction

Journalism is an increasingly dangerous profession. While the cases of physical harm and state-sponsored violence against reporters have been increasing year by year (Asal et al. 2016; Bartman 2018), new attacks through *social media* are posing unprecedented challenges for news organizations (Baroni and Marinho 2023). This is especially true for journalists who belong to historically disadvantaged groups (Stahel 2023). Studies show how female journalists are disproportionately more susceptible to sexism, body shaming, and harassment by the public than their male counterparts (Chen et al. 2020; Koirala 2020). Moreover, people of color and queer journalists frequently deal with higher levels of

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repression and discrimination from audiences and colleagues alike (Miller 2023; Rivas-Rodriguez et al. 2004). Unsurprisingly, studies on journalists' mental health have shown that reporters' rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are higher than those among the overall population (Aoki et al. 2013; Seely 2019). The same is found for other mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Feinstein, Owen, and Blair 2002). Journalists' workplace well-being and mental health have further been worsened in recent years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Šimunjak 2022) has, as Jukes, Fowler-Watt, and Rees (2022) put it, brought trauma in the form of stories about death, grief, and mourning to journalists' "own doorstep" (2022, p. 997).

The platformization of news has done little to improve this situation. Dealing with trolls, doxing, and online death threats is now part of journalists' daily routine (Waisbord 2020b). As reporters moved to social media platforms to interact with their readers and share their articles, violence followed them into the digital spaces — and thereby into their daily lives, also outside of work. Tandoc, Sagun, and Alvarez (2023) have called this phenomenon the "digitization of harassment" against journalists. This concept shows how online spaces not only mirror offline violence against media workers but also amplify aggressive content. Because the audience now has easy access to journalists (Waisbord 2020a), media workers have seen their inboxes, timelines, and comment sections invaded by often well-organized hordes of trolls (Erjavec and Kovačič 2012); making going offline the only possible way to escape hateful content.

This is perhaps one of the most significant consequences of uncontrolled, anti-press violence: It promotes a *chilling effect* among media workers (Kim and Shin 2022). That is, reporters might (a) hesitate to cover specific topics or issues for fear of retaliation, and they might (b) abandon online spaces or even (c) consider leaving the profession altogether (Miller 2023). Media workers, who often receive little to no support from their organization, are expected to avoid putting themselves in further danger by employing self-censorship as a self-defense strategy (Chavez 2020). However, by doing so, anti-press violence is not only severely affecting journalists' physical and mental well-being but democracy in general. As Walulya and Nassanga (2020) have argued, "the harassment of journalists and preventing them from accessing some news sources [...] narrow their reporting scope, eventually leading to unbalanced information as a result of self-censorship" (2020, p. 12). Often, as Henrichsen and Shelton (2023) note, self-censorship as a result of online mobs' violence occurs in patterned ways and mainly affects journalists covering topics such as QAnon, the COVID-19 pandemic, or other issues related to the crisis of democracy itself.

Thus, while social media platforms have indeed allowed journalists to create new, more intimate relationships with their audiences (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014), it is simultaneously true that these platforms have become "highly inhospitable places for journalists" (Miller and Nelson 2022, 2). Quandt (2018) refers to this phenomenon as "dark participation" or "the evil flip of citizen engagement" (35). Moreover, the challenges journalists face when they endure harassment are worsened by the absence of formal support systems within most news organizations and inadequate moderation policies of social media companies (Udupa, Maronikoulakis, and Wisioek 2023). Therefore, in this article, we aim to better understand the role that digital violence plays in journalists' work, reporters' perception of the use of social media platforms, and the coping mechanism that they have developed to protect themselves against abusive behavior.

How journalists perceive digital violence on social media platforms is, therefore, our main research question. Two specific sub-questions that would allow us to answer this question are: (RQ₁) What are the perspectives of journalists regarding the role and effectiveness of their own media organizations in moderating abusive content? And (RQ₂) How do journalists perceive the role of social media companies in moderating abusive content? For our analysis, we draw from seven months of ethnographic work inside the Chilean newsrooms of the daily newspaper *La Tercera* and the television broadcast channel *Canal 13*.

The study of the precariousness of working conditions in journalism, the dominance of platform logic, and the instrumental role of emotions in promoting anti-press discourses and disinformation find a fitting backdrop in contemporary Chile. The Chilean media landscape presents a rich case study for examining these dynamics, as the crisis in the journalism industry has left media organizations vulnerable and ill-equipped to protect their workers against online abuse (Monje, Rivero, and Zanotti 2020; Tejedor et al. 2022). Although our study is based in Chile, the global nature of the investigated issue (digital violence against journalists) suggests that the findings could also apply to different contexts. Our results have important implications for understanding how digital violence impacts journalistic work; however, the findings also highlight the hyper-dependent relationship between newsrooms and social media platforms for news distribution and audience engagement.

Online Harassment and Platforms Moderation

While social media platforms significantly expanded journalists' toolboxes by allowing them to reap the fruits of spaces like *Twitter* and *Facebook* for finding sources, news distribution, and audience engagement, these platforms have also put journalists in vulnerable positions. The advent of social media platforms has not only transformed journalism's content but also contributed to the deterioration of journalists' working conditions (Popović 2018). Today, metrics and demanding platform dependencies (Dodds et al. 2023; Meese and Hurcombe 2021) are exacerbating the precarious situation of media organizations, particularly those media less likely to contest the power of big tech platforms. Therefore, in this article, we argue that to comprehensively understand the rise of online hate against journalists, one must recognize the relationship between digital platforms and the current working conditions in journalism.

One platform that exemplifies the complexities and challenges faced by journalists online is *Twitter*, now known as *X*. As Henrichsen and Shelton (2023) argue in their work on the analytical boundaries of mob censorship, *Twitter* has become an essential tool for journalists to connect with sources and gather story ideas. The platform enables a dynamic exchange of activities between journalists and their sources, providing unparalleled opportunities for information sharing. Moreover, recent studies have shown that *Twitter* allows journalists to freely express their personal interests and create communities to discuss topics unrelated to their media work (Baftiu and Dodds 2023). However, Henrichsen and Shelton (2023) also highlight the darker side of *Twitter*, noting that "mob harassers leverage the technological affordances of *Twitter* and its interstitial nature to game algorithms and reporting functions to carry out coordinated harassment campaigns against journalists" (2022, p. 7).

Their study is not alone in shedding light on these issues. Other studies have extensively outlined how online mobs organize themselves and execute their attacks through the technological affordances of social media platforms (Bastiaensens et al. 2015; Kargar and Rauchfleisch 2019; Pearce 2015). These studies suggest that the same affordances that allow journalists to establish a closer relationship with their audiences and report news more efficiently also enable (hate) campaigns that aim to disrupt journalistic activities and negatively shape an online public narrative about journalistic trust. Lewis and Westlund (2015) further clarify that journalism is increasingly interconnected with technological tools, processes, and ways of thinking, becoming the new organizing logic of media work. These dependencies not only affect journalists' working conditions but also the formats and the quality of their products.

To mitigate the damage caused by online harassment, social media platforms (Gillespie 2018), as well as its users, (Geiger 2016) have engaged in regulatory practices to diminish the visibility of harassment-related content; although on *Twitter*, these practices were quickly undone since Elon Musk's acquisition. DeCook et al. (2022, 64) aptly argue that "after years of attempting to absolve themselves of blame [...], Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, and others have implemented new sweeping policies that have banned groups, hashtags, and other means of digital connection and coordination that these platforms afforded." However, these changes came after years of these platforms allowing the unhindered spread of radical ideology and misleading information. Tech companies have tried to deploy strategies to contain harmful content on their platforms, including de-platforming and AI-driven methods to detect harmful content. However, as Udupa, Maronikolakis, and Wisiorek (2023) demonstrate, severe linguistic and contextual knowledge gaps highly complicate this endeavor.

Moreover, many legal and technical definitions of harassment still center on the so-called dyadic model of harassment, presuming that violence comes from one person. However, on social media platforms like *Twitter*, more often than not, harassment is "networked" (Marwick 2021). An "amplifier account" can, willingly or unwillingly, instigate harassment, and its networked audience is then triggered to participate. When harassment is morally motivated, participants in networked attacks not only align with normative critiques but also delineate or signal their belonging to a social group (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020). This is how networked harassment acquires value as it unfolds and channels attention in particular ways. Seen in this way, networked harassment results from the ecosystemic logic of social media platforms.

Thus, despite efforts to regulate online harassment, social media platforms have not fundamentally altered their ecosystemic design regarding moderating practices, perpetuating an unsafe space on which many journalists still have to rely for their profession. This ecosystem is also conceptualized as an "influencer ecology," in which a constant battle for attention plays out. In the context of digital violence, this pertains to so-called cycles of amplification (Phillips 2013) that emerge from an interplay between actors intentionally or unintentionally promoting malicious content and influential accounts, including politicians and legacy news media, who may amplify such content. This vicious cycle is especially pertinent in alternative and fringe media (Rogers 2021) that closely monitor, and contest narratives presented by established media sources. In doing so, they often engage in intense critique, attach misinformation to mainstream narratives, and launch attacks on news outlets and journalists (Fawzi and Krämer 2021). Furthermore, online

violence against journalists frequently becomes embedded within conspiracy theories that portray the press as part of an elitist collusion (Ward and Voas 2011).

The journalism industry and its increasingly dependent relationship with social media platforms is making it more and more challenging to censor, control, and protect workers from online abuse (Cohen 2019). While the challenges of the current media ecosystem are extensively studied, media scholars have still largely overlooked newsrooms' working conditions and their relationship with online violence. Instead, when studying journalism, researchers often focus on journalists' perceptions of their roles and notions of professionalism, neglecting the examination of the actual working conditions through which they have to perform such roles (Gollmitzer 2014).

It has become clear that, despite the initial widespread belief that digital technologies would empower journalists, the reality has been quite different (Ciccarelli 2021). Petre (2021) asserts that journalism should be regarded as a form of labor, which has become increasingly casualized and precarious in an era dominated by rapid technological advancements and the dominance of technology platforms in digital advertising and media distribution. The growing prioritization of market logic over journalistic principles has worsened newsroom working conditions in specific contexts. Additionally, the lack of union organizations within newsrooms has further complicated the already unfavorable labor rights situation for media workers (Proffitt 2021), although there are indications that this trend is gradually changing, with emerging efforts towards unionization in newsrooms (Cohen and de Peuter 2020; Salamon 2016).

Chile as a Case Study

The right-wing dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, which lasted from 1973 to 1990, brought an end to nearly a century-long tradition of journalist unionization in the country (Castillo and Mellado 2012). The current state of journalists' protection in Chile is highly irregular, with inadequate digital oversight and a lack of unionized support systems to shield reporters from physical and online violence, including misinformation campaigns and targeted conspiracy theories (Núñez-Mussa 2021; Sapiezynska and Lagos 2016). Although journalism degrees are now offered at the university level, there is no mandatory requirement for graduates to join a union or professional organization, as is the case in many Western countries. As a result, the responsibility for ensuring the well-being of media workers largely falls on their employers or on the individual journalists themselves.

Given the financial precariousness of news outlets and media concentration in Chile (Lagos and Cabalin 2013), this situation poses significant challenges for journalists who regularly engage with online audiences and expose themselves on digital platforms. Consequently, local studies have emphasized the urgent need for a legislative framework that establishes essential conditions for Chilean journalists to carry out their work effectively and to avoid burnout (Gutiérrez Atala, Ferreira Jiménez, and Pajoni 2015).

Instances of social unrest in Chile, such as the ongoing indigenous self-determination Mapuche conflict in the country's southern region (Monje, Rivero, and Zanotti 2020) or the October Revolution of 2019 against social inequality (Dodds 2021), have demonstrated the vulnerability of Chilean reporters to online harassment and misinformation campaigns. Especially during the social upheaval in 2019, journalists witnessed an alarming

level of harassment, disinformation, and online intimidation campaigns originating from both protestors and police forces, according to data collected by Reporters Without Borders (2019). However, violence against Chilean journalists is not limited to periods of revolution or ethnic conflicts. In recent years, numerous studies have shed light on the disadvantaged position of female journalists within national newsrooms and the specific form of violence they endure on a daily basis, often centered around body-shaming (Dodds and Amor 2017; Lagos and Mellado 2013).

The absence of a unionized support system is not the sole reason why Chilean journalism makes for such an interesting case study regarding online harassment. The country's news ecosystem, characterized by technological innovations and a high penetration rate of internet access in the country, provides an important opportunity to investigate hyper-connected audiences and their aggressive behavior toward journalists online. Recent studies indicate that 76% of Chileans believe social media networks allow them to stay continuously informed, surpassing the percentage in the United States, which stands at 67% (Newman et al. 2018). Furthermore, by 2016, only Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay had achieved over 60% household Internet penetration in the Latin-American region. Therefore, it is understandable that Chilean media organizations intensely rely on new digital platforms that users can utilize when consuming news. Thereby, Chile is a front-runner in the Global South, and the trends observed here might later also occur in countries where the penetration of the Internet has been slower.

As Godoy (2016) argues, the lack of public funding and the heavy reliance on advertising in the Chilean context since Pinochet liberalized the economy in 1975 have created a media system characterized by a blend of elitist, European-inspired public-service principles and conflicting mass appeal and market-driven rules. Consequently, Chilean media have been exposed to a new ecosystem of technological innovations, leading to the emergence of new media forms, primarily on social networks and digital websites. However, the precarity of journalism has meant that these new spaces remain largely uncensored and unregulated, making Chilean journalists an easy target for misinformation campaigns that frequently draw upon conspiracy theories.

Methodology

This study conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two Chilean newsrooms. Ethnographic approaches, specifically participant observation, offer numerous benefits for studying the experience of violence within newsrooms (Ellis 2015). For example, according to Klinenberg (2005), researchers often have to speculate about the impact of technology on journalists' routines and media production due to a lack of direct access to the newsrooms they study. On the contrary, an ethnographic approach, including participant observation, aims to bridge the gap between journalists' claimed experiences with violence and their actual experiences.

The lead researcher conducted full-time fieldwork for seven months between 2017 and 2018 in two Chilean newsrooms: *La Tercera*, a prominent national newspaper in Chile, and *Teletrece*, the news department of *Canal 13* television news. This allowed for the examination of over a dozen formal semi-structured interviews and several informal conversations with television and newspaper journalists. Although the lead author always worked inside the newsroom, he often changed shifts and roles to engage with

different professionals involved in newswork. Moreover, as the lead author for this article was present in the newsroom at all times, he could not only chat with journalists about their experience with violence but also observe their reactions and even experience it firsthand, as the fieldwork included participant observation. These observations resulted in two notebooks of notes that, together with the interviews, were later transcribed, translated, and coded for analysis.

The data from the interviews, field notes, and chat groups collected during the fieldwork were analyzed using an inductive technique. This ensures that once the raw data was analyzed between the co-authors, our results were conceived from the data itself rather than pre-established categories in the literature (Sandelowski 2004).

During the course of this study's fieldwork, the lead author observed an initial reluctance among journalists to disclose instances of direct violence during the initial interviews. However, as the researcher continued to work closely with them on a daily basis, a sense of familiarity and trust began to develop, leading journalists to gradually open up and share more intimate accounts of the harassment they had endured.

The lead author's journalistic background also provided advantages. Access to newsrooms is often restricted due to concerns about confidentiality. However, with the permission of the managing editors, the researcher was granted access to essential information while protecting individuals' identities and sensitive details. The lead author often reassured journalists that the goal of the research was to understand the journalists' perspective rather than to criticize or discredit their work.

Building trust with journalists was a crucial aspect of the research. Instead of relying solely on interviews, the researcher utilized participant observation as the foundation for conducting interviews. Spending time in the newsroom and establishing relationships with media workers allowed for targeted questions based on individual roles, work, and expressed interests. The researcher's own journalistic background made a mutual understanding easier and increased the trust between interviewer and interviewee.

To mitigate repeated phrases and social desirability bias in interviews, the researcher leveraged their relationships and knowledge of the individuals' roles to ask relevant and specific questions. In addition to interviews and participant observation, the researcher actively worked as a journalist within the newsrooms, gaining firsthand experience of the relationships between journalists and the public, their sources, and colleagues, as well as insights into the decision-making process for selecting news stories.

Overall, the ethnographic approach, facilitated by participant observation, provided valuable insights into the experience of violence within newsrooms. It allowed for the collection of authentic data, addressing biases in interviews, and obtaining a comprehensive understanding of news production complexities and the impact of technological changes.

Results

This article examines how newsrooms and news organizations in Chile have responded to the hate and harassment their workers face in the digital space. Specifically, it explores the organizational tactics employed to moderate hateful content, and it delves into how journalists have reacted to their employer's efforts (or lack of efforts) to protect them from online abuse. In addition, this section presents the findings from interviews conducted

with reporters and social media editors, providing insights into their experiences and attempts to combat harassment.

Journalists' Perception of Media Organizations in Moderation

A web editor in *La Tercera* described the comment section under their news articles as a “no man’s land”, highlighting the challenges faced when reviewing and monitoring the overwhelming number of responses in the comment section—sometimes exceeding the thousands—for offensive material. “When there are offensive or racist comments, yeah, of course, you delete them, but someone must see them and say they are offensive. And that exercise we do not always do,” he continued. He added that the lack of moderation was unrelated to dismissing how damaging these comments could become. Instead, the root of the problem was a severe absence of human power to go over each sentence or post. He recounted how once there were professionals whose sole job was to dedicate themselves to moderating comments. “But I am talking about the days when web newsrooms were giants,” he finished.

This new relationship with audiences has begun to shape journalists’ perceptions of their readers. As one digital reporter pointed out, journalists often feel that a portion of the audience engaging with their articles in the comment section is just “unloading their anger” onto journalists rather than fostering constructive discussions. Consequently, journalists in these newsrooms have become less inclined to establish meaningful feedback loops with readers, while raising doubts about their organization’s ability to protect them. During interviews, web editors in both newsrooms expressed concerns that comment sections and forums became spaces where people predominantly vented their anger and frustration. As one of the web editors in *Teletrece* put it:

“I don’t know why, but people spend much time unloading their anger and frustration in our comment sections. I know that some websites have them ... for example, Emol ... a big part of Emol’s readership keeps coming back because they have the comment section activated, and people get there to throw shit.”

This interviewee, a web editor, cited the example of *Emol*, the digital version of the national newspaper *El Mercurio*, which competes with *La Tercera*. According to the web editor, a significant portion of Emol’s readership comes from activating these comment sections and letting people say whatever they want. That is why, according to this same web editor, it is common to see articles with headlines such as “Should women abort freely?” circling on the homepage of Emol; simply, because such articles will surely produce a heated debate among readers. “This is not what I believe; this was told to me by someone working at Emol. People get into Emol’s comment section to throw shit, and they know it,” the editor added. Creating a public platform, where the public can express their hatred to each other, thus seems a commercially-driven and conscious decision of this medium.

Many of the interviewed journalists indeed believed that some media outlets, including their own, were consciously exploiting these sections to boost their readerships, irrespective of the toxic conversational environment they fostered. Journalists in the newsroom where our ethnographic fieldwork was conducted saw with apprehension how other media outlets in Chile were using these spaces to expand their audience

metrics, regardless of the tone of the conversation. They feared that their managers could be taking note and follow this practice, if they were not doing so already.

This was particularly problematic for our interviewees because users' engagement practices with one news outlet could later spill to other websites. From the journalists' point of view, audience members cannot always distinguish which news outlets are trying to produce a heated response from them, normalizing these types of violent reactions and, thereby, creating an (online) culture in which harassment becomes the norm. As a result, users may replicate the same behavior across different sites and platforms — even those where the intentions to create a public forum are different.

Personally confronted with violent reactions to their articles, both in their comment sections and on social media, digital journalists working for the television station where we conducted the ethnography pleaded to their editor to be able to sign sensitive news articles anonymously. However, a newsroom policy mandated that every article be signed with the corresponding journalist's name on the by-line. The intention behind this policy, as a digital journalist explained, felt like it was to assign blame in case of mistakes: "At the end of the day, it was nothing more than to know whom to blame if you screw up." The journalist recounted an experience of covering a far right-wing party's candidate during the 2013 presidential campaign, which led to harassment from both left and right-wing supporters in the comment sections and on social media. This perplexed the journalist, as she had not disclosed her real name on social media nor publicly associated herself with the news outlet on her profile. She was not using her real name on *Twitter* nor had said online that she worked for that news outlet: "It surprised me that people went to great lengths to find me and call me either a fascist or communist depending on the article I was writing."

Eventually, internet editors allowed journalists to sign articles with their initials when the content primarily consisted of press releases or third-party interviews, reserving the use of their full names for articles where they had reported themselves and had complete control over the content. However, this policy change came late for some journalists, leading to resentment and a sense of fighting against the system. The combination of insufficient human resources to effectively moderate audience reactions to controversial news content and the obligation for journalists to sign their names on by-lines based on organizational values placed digital reporters in a precarious and dangerous position. As the next interviewed digital journalist in the TV station put it, "We resented it a lot. So, we fight [the editors] back a lot."

The scarcity of human resources dedicated to moderation hampered the ability to tackle offensive comments and exacerbated the strain on journalists' well-being. The constant exposure to hate and harassment online affects their mental health, leading to feelings of abandonment and vulnerability. According to the interviewees, journalists are left grappling with the burden of managing their own safety while fulfilling their professional responsibilities. The lack of support from newsrooms in addressing these issues further erodes the trust between journalists and their managers, creating an environment of apprehension and disillusionment.

Moreover, the policy requiring journalists to sign their names on articles can have unintended consequences, as the interviewees argued. While transparency and accountability are essential in journalism, they simultaneously expose journalists to targeted attacks and abuse without a protection system they could fall back on.

Journalists' Perception of Social Media Platforms in Moderation

Journalists often feel frustrated with their managers and organizations due to the dependent relationship between newsrooms and social media platforms. To dig deeper into this relationship and answer our second sub-question regarding journalists' perceptions of social media platforms' role in moderating hate, we have also conducted an interview with the social media editor of the television station.

The editor in charge of social media expressed frustration with how platforms hold a monopoly over news dissemination. "It is very perverse," the editor said when describing their relationship with platforms. He added, "[social media platforms] are the owners of the business, and they have the monopoly." The editor emphasized that newsrooms feel compelled to comply with platform directives on story coverage to avoid negative repercussions, such as a significant drop in traffic metrics. He argued that if newsrooms refused to follow suit on their commands about what type of stories to cover, platforms would penalize them by negatively changing their traffic metrics: "If you do not follow their rules, they would leave you out and tell you: 'If you do not want to do it, it is perfect, it is your editorial line,' but then your traffic will fall 40%."

The power dynamics between newsrooms and social media platforms are unequal and affect digital journalists in the sampled newsrooms. A digital reporter acknowledged the importance of creating clickable news but also recognized the need to engage with and address violent comments online. As the reporter put it, "We need clickable news," therefore, it is impossible to turn away from using these platforms. During the interviews, another digital editor provided insights into moderating comments on various platforms, revealing the complexities involved:

"Maybe on Facebook, you can do something because you can delete the comments as an admin, but on Twitter is impossible. We can't delete the tweets of other people. For example, we reported accounts on Facebook for spam or that we have already seen inciting too much hatred. We sometimes block people on Facebook, but it has to be very specific ... But on Facebook, we try to leave comments. We try to leave them because ... Sometimes if you delete one, five more appear. That happens a lot."

The digital editor's remarks highlighted the challenges of managing user-generated content on social media platforms. While *Facebook* allows administrators to delete comments, *Twitter* presents a different scenario where deleting tweets from other users is impossible. Regulating online discourse effectively is, therefore, challenging. The editor mentioned instances where accounts on *Facebook* were reported for spamming activities or inciting hatred and how selective blocking of individuals was used in specific cases. However, on *Facebook*, the dominant strategy is to leave comments untouched to avoid further comments surfacing in response to deletions, which could cause a downward spiral.

Despite the negativity and lack of power to effectively deal with this, journalists are often compelled to follow the directives of these platforms to increase their visibility and engagement with their audience. However, moderating user-generated content is a complex and limiting task, leading to frustration and dependency on these platforms. Moreover, regulating hate speech on social media becomes even more difficult due to the differing capabilities of comment moderation across platforms. Another social media editor highlighted *Facebook's* affordance regarding content moderation:

"We have blocked words on Facebook. For example, if someone writes a comment and that comment has words like "whore," "shit," "motherfucker," and "son of a bitch," among many other terms, Facebook has a filter and hides the comment. It doesn't delete it. Now on Twitter, you can't do it. And if you troll too much, we try to ... I don't know, on Twitter, it's much more complicated because there are troll soldiers. [...] I mean, the issue of being able to monitor, it's a matter of time, cost-opportunity, as they say in economics. If you do this, you can't do this other thing. So that's it."

In the context of violence against journalists and the role of social media platforms, the interview extract highlights the different approaches of *Facebook* and *Twitter* in handling inappropriate comments. On *Facebook*, certain words, including derogatory and offensive terms, are blocked, and comments containing such words can be hidden instead of being deleted. However, *Twitter* lacks a similar filtering mechanism, making it more challenging to address trolling behavior. The interviewee acknowledges the difficulty in monitoring and addressing these issues, as it requires time and resources, presenting a trade-off between various tasks. Moreover, the extract highlights how the burden of moderation relies on journalists themselves, by journalists' perceptions and actions, rather than on support by the social media platforms. Lastly, it is important to recognize how experiencing online harassment informs the strategies that journalists use to cope with undesirable violent content. As a digital reporter said during our interview: "There's something that one learns over time: for the sake of mental well-being, one shouldn't read the comments on your own articles. Never. Because rarely will they say, 'great article.'"

Discussion

Integrating social media platforms into journalism practices has led to a shift in the relationship between journalists, their audiences, and news organizations. Journalists are now expected to navigate the complex landscape of social media platforms, engage with their audience in real-time, and promote their work through various digital channels.

Moreover, social media platforms have introduced audience metrics that shape journalists' performance and influence editorial decision-making. Metrics from social media, such as likes, shares, and retweets, have become indicators of success, creating pressure to produce content that generates high engagement; representing a move from newsworthiness to shareworthiness (Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher 2017). As a result, journalists find themselves in a constant battle for attention as the algorithms of social media platforms prioritize content that is likely to garner more interaction, often leading to the amplification of sensationalized or controversial stories.

Additionally, journalists' reliance on social media platforms for news distribution has made them susceptible to the power dynamics inherent in these platforms. The algorithms that determine the visibility of content can shape the public discourse and influence the narratives around journalism and journalists. Media organizations, especially those with limited resources or smaller audiences, face the challenge of competing for attention in an environment where algorithms favor sensationalism and clickbait. This not only compromises the quality of news but also exacerbates the vulnerability of journalists to online harassment and attacks. This dynamic of attention-grabbing sensationalism also impacts the comment spaces of news media websites. One of the interviewees

refers to a “spill-over” of online culture that normalizes violence because users can no longer distinguish between news outlets that try to produce a heated debate and those that are not; they replicate violent behavior across sites and platforms.

Our findings indicate that while social media platforms have implemented some measures to address online harassment, their efforts have been insufficient. These results go in line with previous research, as Holton et al. (2023), although news media organizations have demonstrated “efforts to quell harassment within the newsroom and in face-to-face situations, [...] the same care may not apply to harassment from news audiences directed at journalists online” (869). Moreover, these platforms’ (partly automated) moderation practices often fall short, allowing abusive and harmful content to persist (Udupa, Maronikolakis, and Wisiorek 2023). As a result, journalists, particularly those covering sensitive topics, became targets of coordinated harassment campaigns that aimed to discredit their work, undermine their credibility, and silence their voices.

It is important to understand the networked character of harassment as it unfolds on a platform like *Twitter*. Someone with a significant followership can amplify an attack, either deliberately or not. The model of moral contagion proposed by Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel (2020) is useful in explaining how people are “motivated to share moral-emotional content based on their group identity; that such content is especially likely to capture attention; and that the design of social media platforms interacts with these psychological tendencies to further facilitate its spread” (Brady, Crockett, and Van Bavel 2020, 980). As our results show, one of the journalists mentions the financial benefits of offering people a platform to “throw shit,” but these benefits come at the expense of journalists, who are often the target of collective anger.

Many studies contextualize this observation about the “dark side of social media” (see Quandt and Klapproth 2023): Outrage and anger are often exploited to attract attention (Barnidge and Peacock 2019; Berry and Sobieraj 2013). These motions are not solely a result of political polarization, but they are also driven by social media’s emphasis on prolonged engagement. As social media users must stick to the platforms for as long as possible, the rationale for these platforms is to agitate us. A study conducted by Berger and Milkman (2012) on viral news content found that articles evoking high-arousal positive emotions (such as awe) or high-arousal negative emotions (such as anger or anxiety) are more likely to go viral. Conversely, content eliciting low-arousal or deactivating emotions (such as sadness) is less likely to achieve viral status. This socio-technical synergy creates an environment in which news outlets can capitalize on outrage.

The same synergetic phenomenon that spurs the sharing of outrage has also created an ambivalent status quo where social media platforms have diversified news consumption (Barnidge and Peacock 2019) and, at the same time, fueled polarization. The subsequent process of radicalization inherently at play is addressed by O’Hara and Stevens (2015), who highlight that engaging with ideological adversaries does not reduce partisanship. In fact, exposure to diversified information can intensify polarization by reinforcing in-group identification and creating an “other” that represents the political enemy (Bruns 2019). This in-group identification resonates with the earlier discussed model of moral contagion online (Brady et al. 2017, 2020) and Marwick (2021), where ideologically bounded groups will engage in collective attacks. These groups are not isolated but rather

are confronted with other groups. Depending on political leanings, journalists can be in the out-group, and as such, they can collapse into a detached elite (Fawzi and Krämer 2021). They become a political enemy and a symbol by which one can engage in boundary work where the journalist who is not complying with held political views is the epiphany of the out-group. This is very apparent in the interview where a journalist explains how people would call her a fascist or a communist, depending on her written work.

Understanding the rise of online hate against journalists requires a comprehensive examination of labor dynamics within digital platforms and the current working conditions in journalism. By addressing these systemic issues and promoting a safer and more inclusive online environment, we can safeguard the integrity of journalism and protect the professionals who contribute to the public's right to information.

Media organizations need to prioritize the well-being and safety of their journalists, providing them with adequate support and resources to navigate the challenges of the digital landscape. This includes implementing effective moderation systems, fostering a culture of respect and empathy online, and advocating for platform reforms that prioritize user safety and the integrity of journalists. However, our journalist interviewees have little trust in their organizations to improve these conditions, sometimes even fearing that news media may intentionally make the conditions on social media worse with the goal of increasing the traffic to their own websites. These findings mirror those of Deavours et al. (2023), who, drawing from interviews with more than 20 journalists, found that reporters perceived that "individuals were responsible for their own psychological and physical protection, both in preventing and responding to harassment" rather than viewing abuse as an issue media organizations should take the lead in combat.

Future research should try to interview the news media's managers, who are responsible for the (online) strategies of their journalistic outlets, to verify these insights; although, one could question their openness about this matter.

Conclusion

This research highlights the profound impact of online violence against journalists on the relationship with their news organizations and what they think of audience feedback. Journalists' resentment towards how their organizations handle online violent behaviors (e.g., on social media platforms and comment sections) has a direct influence on their perceptions of such audience engagement. Such violence not only changes how journalists interact with their organizations but also alters the value they place on direct feedback from readers. In short, due to the large amounts of negativity and hateful speech in the comments of the public, journalists try to avoid this altogether and thereby also miss the valuable comments that could support their work or increase their working pleasure.

Platforms, by design, widen the gap between journalists and audiences, not only by algorithmic curation of those audiences but also by the affective polarization they afford. We know that social media are not "merely arenas for rational deliberation" but rather boast a space for social identity formation and "symbolic displays of solidarity with allies and difference from outgroups" (Törnberg 2022, 10). Journalists are prone to

falling victim to the consequences of online platforms, which work like partisan sorting machines where the only comments and interactions that gain traction are those that deepen the divide between us and them; thereby, perpetuating a populist paradigm in which journalists who do not align with the beliefs of the in-group are necessarily constituting the “them” (Fawzi and Krämer 2021).

Recognizing the challenges faced by digital journalists, certain news organizations have implemented measures to protect their reporters. For instance, allowing journalists in *Canal 13* to use initials or pseudonyms for specific types of content provides a shield against direct attacks. This acknowledgment of the need for balance between journalistic transparency and professional safety enables journalists to maintain their safety while carrying out their journalistic duties. However, for those who have experienced the negative effects prior to these changes, the sense of resentment and the lasting impact of past harassment may persist, as explained by the journalist who was constantly harassed for covering political elections.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the perceptions of journalists and news organizations in the face of online harassment. The findings emphasize the immense challenges newsrooms face in moderating hateful content, primarily due to a lack of human resources. Furthermore, the unhealthy relationship that journalists develop with their audience, along with concerns about media outlets exploiting toxic comment sections for increased readership, further complicates the issue. The policy mandating journalists to sign their names on articles adds another layer of vulnerability, exposing them to targeted attacks. Therefore, it is crucial for news organizations to prioritize the well-being and safety of their journalists by providing the necessary resources, support, and flexibility to navigate the evolving digital landscape. Only by addressing these challenges can newsrooms foster an environment that encourages open dialogue, protects journalists from online abuse, and upholds the values of responsible journalism in the digital age.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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