#NotOk

Stand Up for Journalism and Democracy

Preface

This safety guide and tip sheets are to be used as a draft, subject to modification.

The best practices listed are based on significant feedback and input across the news media industry.

These resources will continue to be updated and will evolve based on additional feedback from across the news industry, as well as changes in the forms of online harm facing journalists and media professionals.

If your organization would like to incorporate this information in a personalized format, and with specific edits to make them more appropriate for your internal use, these can be accessed in an adaptable format.

Please email us at cbc.radio-canada@cbc.ca and we will share that format with you directly.

Content

Why this issue is important

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Joe Passaretti/CBC Still Photo Collection

More journalists than ever before are being exposed to hostile environments — often without leaving their newsrooms. Online violence is the new frontline in journalists' safety, impacting our entire industry, and we need to respond to it collectively.

Online violence doesn't just exist in the virtual world. It affects journalists' physical and psychological safety, and often results in an impact offline on those attacked. Unfortunately, it has become so common that many journalists feel it is simply part of their job. This is #NotOk.

Online violence affects those who are most marginalized, including women, racialized people and LGBTQ2S+ people, often forcing them to self-censor and, in some instances, leave the industry. All too often, those impacted feel silenced and unable to share their experiences, as it also takes a toll on their emotional wellbeing.

When journalists can't cover certain stories, media plurality, press freedom and democracy suffer. Sadly, some people still believe it is acceptable to harass journalists. More must be done to show the public that this is #NotOK.

Evan Mitsui/CBC

As an industry, we must do more to make clear that online harm should not come with the territory of being a journalist. We need to normalize conversations about the nature and impact of online harm and join forces to tackle it for the sake of journalism and its role in democracy.

Just as we wouldn't send journalists into dangerous environments without taking the necessary precautions to prepare and protect them, we need to do more to protect those going into online danger zones.

Note: We use the term "online harm" interchangeably with "online harassment" and "online violence" to underscore the fact this issue transcends legal definitions and emphasize whenever a journalist is attacked or threatened, it can hurt, and should be taken seriously.

Who is this guide for?

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This guide has been developed for Canadian news media professionals in leadership positions. It provides practical guidance as well as thinking points and talking points to better support those impacted by online harm and to help organizations identify the resources and supports to put in place.

It is not specifically intended as a guide for journalists experiencing online harm.

It should be considered a living document that will continue to be updated as the nature of online harm evolves.

It is important to note that the people experiencing online harm should not be made to feel as if they are entirely responsible for adapting their behaviour or providing solutions to protect themselves from harassers. A separate short document provides tips for journalists and media professionals affected by online harm.

Evan Mitsui/CBC

What does it include?

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Dereck Hopper/CBC

We have gathered best practices from news organizations around the world, including suggestions for **what to do before, during and after** an incident or incidents. By planning to mitigate risk, dealing with events as they happen and providing after-care, you can better support your colleagues and teams.

This guide also gives some context to the environment in which journalists are being attacked, and provides further resources and references.

In collating this material, we are grateful to our colleagues across the journalism industry for sharing best practices and their insights. It's vital that we continue to work together to tackle this threat and to support journalism in its important role in shoring up democracy.

Forms of
online harm

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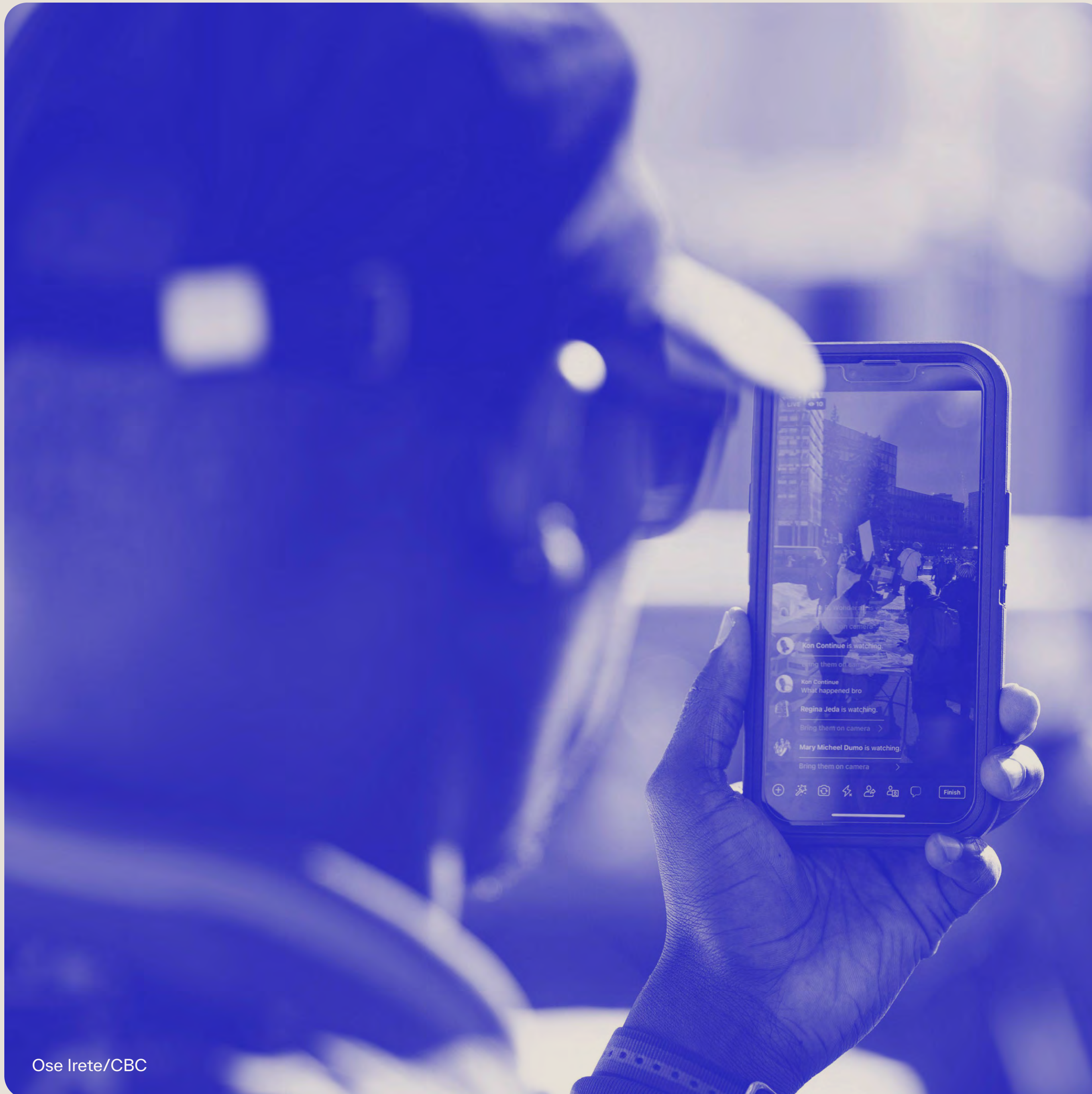
Ose Irete/CBC

Online harassment takes many forms. Sometimes it includes specific threats and attacks; other times they are insinuated. Women are often targeted by sexualized abuse. Sometimes online harassment takes the form of images, which may be deep fakes. Sometimes the person's reputation is attacked, through false accusations or statements (disinformation), or other forms of smear campaigns made in an attempt to discredit them. At times, fake accounts may pose as the targeted individual.

Two other specific forms of online harm include **doxing**, when private information (such as phone numbers and addresses) is revealed publicly, usually online, and **pile-ons,** when many people attack an individual simultaneously online. Attacks take place on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and via email, where phishing at-tempts and unpleasant messages can also target individuals or groups.

Governments, elected officials, non-state actors, bots and trolls can all be behind online harm, and attacks can come from individuals or be part of orchestrated campaigns. This means there is no one-size-fits-all approach to tackling online violence, or to supporting those who are targeted. Since the scourge changes so quickly, what works at one time may not work later.

The most important thing to remember in mitigating, preparing for and countering online harm is that those targeted by online harm are human beings, and they need supportive relationships with colleagues who can help them.

What you need to know

Different situations require different responses. Flexibility is key.
That editors and managers need to know:

o Take this issue seriously throughout the organization, with leadership from the top.

o Take it clear to your colleagues that online harm is not ok and you're committed to addressing it as an organization. Encourage your teams to report online harassment whenever it happens.

o Show humanity and recognize these are human beings who are impacted.

o Know that online violence also affects people offline.

o Show people you care; listen and make it clear that the violence isn't their fault, and that you want to work with them to support them.

o Ensure people know that sharing their experiences will not impact their careers or reputations.

o Understand that women, racialized and LGBTQ2S+ people are more likely to be targeted and may need different kinds of support.

Actions to take before incidents of online harm occur

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Evan Mitsui/CBC

When journalists go to hostile environments, it is good practice for them to do a risk assessment with sign off from the relevant people, such as their line manager and security team.
Newsrooms can replicate this for hostile online environments. Consider the individual's exposure, their operating environment and the support system within your organization, and identify the risks that can be removed, miti-gated or minimized, as well as the resources needed by those at risk of being targeted.

o Leaders must make it clear that the news organization has the backs of those affected by online harm. The commitment and support must come right from the top of the organization and be felt throughout. Leaders should make visible their policies and regularly communicate support for those affected. They must also foster environments where people feel safe to speak and leaders are prepared to listen. The exact level at which online harassment should be reported is indefinable since it will impact different people differently. Encourage your team members to report harassment whenever they feel it is impacting them.

o In all conversations, it's important to note how equity and inclusion are affected by online harm, that women, racialized people and LGBTQ2S+ individuals are more vulnerable to attacks.

o Technology provides practical solutions to manage exposure to harm within your news organization. Certain platforms provide intelligence to disrupt attacks. Set up filters and specific email addresses to divert emails to a particular account that can be overseen or managed by a safety team, for instance.

o Encourage staff to report incidents and make it clear that this will not impact their careers. Establishing a particular email or hub where they can report incidents will also allow organizations to take pre-emptive steps to support those who might face similar threats of violence. Certain stories and subject matters tend to incite more harassment. A database of previous attacks can help you be aware of the themes, stories, targets and sources of the harassment, which can inform planning and predict procedures when harassment could happen.

o Consider what training might best help your colleagues, i.e. digital hygiene or digital self-defense training might best help your colleagues. Talk to your teams about how their personal social media activities intersect with their professional social media activities and what steps they can take to shore up their safety. Note this might also include social activity that is not recent.

o If your organization doesn't already have them, consider establishing relationships with law enforcement, policy makers and social media platforms so you have relevant contacts if needed.

o If you have the resources, consider hiring a specific person to take charge of this file. Reach PLC (UK) has a digital safety editor. ABC Australia has a social media and wellbeing manager. These people have very specific and very visible roles to support their colleagues. If the organization cannot sustain a full-time specialist, consider designating a team member with expertise in this area to act as a trusted guide.

o Consider establishing a peer support network where colleagues can support each other and share their experiences — at the intersection of physical, online and emotional well-being — in a safe interpersonal space. This often complements employee assistance programs, where clinical/expert support is available.

o Identify a top-tier management team, akin to a crisis management team or working group, which communicates regularly, made up by a core team with additional people who can bring in their subject matter expertise where necessary (i.e. legal, HR, safety, editorial, etc.).

o   Consider implementing additional systems of support where those impacted can have their accounts monitored by colleagues so they're not seeing the abuse themselves — and consider if this can be developed into a more extensive peer support network.

o   Some news organizations have a traffic light system which identifies different levels of risk when deploying to physical hostile environments. Consider the same for online hostile environments.

o   Consider the threat of online violence from the commissioning stage when planning stories. Commission diverse writers on diverse stories, and ensure people are not pigeonholed and the same individuals are not exposed continually to attack.

o   Plan when stories will be released and ensure relevant support structures are in place to mitigate the impact of stories that might attract abuse. Consider how the timing of a publication may impact the journalist. Be sure to encourage them to take breaks from work so they do not have to deal with the abuse when they are off duty.

o   Consider training for those in leadership positions so they understand what online harm is and how it affects people. Managers often feel ill-prepared to start conversations about how people are, so training can help them start conversations, engage in active listening and non-judgemental communication, and discuss sensitive issues such as threats of sexual violence. Ensure any conversations around online harm incorporate the potential impact on people's mental health and dismiss outdated stereotypes, such as where people are told to "grow a thick skin" or "toughen up."

Daniel Thomas/CBC/Radio-Canada

What to think about during an incident of online harm

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Derek Hooper/CBC

In the past decade, the motivations of harassers and the scale of attacks have changed significantly. Responses continue to change too, and a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. Strong relationships between those affected by online violence and their news organization are critical to finding flexible, helpful and empathetic responses to online harm. Journalists need to know they have the support of their managers, that they are not to blame for the harassment and that steps to support them are being taken with their full buy-in.

Previous guidance sometimes suggested we shouldn't feed the trolls, but ignoring them is no longer always considered a best practice. This is because the motivation for online harm can be to silence people, and those most at risk are already marginalized by traditional media and society in general. At times, it may be desirable for someone to respond to harmful comments, or for their news organization to respond.

o Create the space to listen to people non-judgmentally and actively.

o Be empathetic and remind your colleagues that sharing their experiences will not affect their careers. Encourage colleagues to report all incidents of online harassment, no matter how insignificant they think it is.

o Ensure the individual feels they can effect change, but does not feel they have to provide all the answers and take all the steps. Discuss with them how you will follow-up and when so they do not feel overburdened.

o Signpost to additional help where needed. This might include a specialist Employee Assistance Program or other specialist psychological support.

o Consider the role of law enforcement and ensure the individual has the support to engage with them if needed, such as a peer who can keep evidence of the attacks as this may be traumatic.

o Encourage the person to practice self-care, including stepping back if they need to. However, be conscious that sometimes they may be reluctant to step away from their work and social media because of their commitment to what they are doing, or other reasons.

o Consider a temporary change of assignment for those impacted by online harms, encouraging them to work on stories less likely to expose them to risk. When doing this, reassure them this is intended to be affirming and not a negative response to what they have experienced.

o Know when to escalate and to whom, including during weekends and off-hours. Escalation may be necessary in numerous situations, including where there is the risk of physical violence or specialist psychological support is needed.

o Encourage individuals to access support offered by colleagues, including temporary social media account monitoring so they don't need to be exposed to harassment.

o Validation goes a long way to supporting people's mental health. Tell your staff what great work they are doing, how important it is and that you have their backs.

o Remember the harassment might impact the journalist's ability to work — either by making it difficult to work, or by making them work more intensely. Be attuned to these responses and provide the necessary support.

o Online abuse often includes offensive threats that managers may find difficult to discuss. It's important managers are able to use appropriate language around threats of gender-based violence like rape.

o Consider the implication of asking the individual not to feed the trolls, and if this might make them feel further disempowered. Is it possible for them to respond in a respectful way, debunking falsehoods without it being too onerous to them, sparking a pile-on or other negative response, or would it better to mute, block, or ignore?

o Consider when it might be appropriate for the organization to respond publicly and show solidarity with the affected journalist. What are the different options for doing this? Will there be communication from the top of the corporation? Is it appropriate to encourage others in the organization to flood the affected person's timeline with positive messages (and if so, are there policies and/or guidelines in place as to how to do this?)

What to think about after an incident of online harm

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After journalists return from difficult assignments in hostile physical environments, it's good practice to offer decompression time to give them a break, knowing that they are supported by their colleagues and can access additional support if they need it. It may also be the case that after a difficult story, a news organization decides to assign them to a less pressure or lower risk story. The same can be done after being exposed to a hostile online environment. Some journalists may push back when asked to step away from stories or regular assignments. However, time off can help their recovery, resilience and mental health, enabling them to continue doing their jobs effectively. This is where the relationship between the journalist and their manager or editor is increasingly important.

Ben Nelms/CBC

o After returning from difficult assignments, journalists often benefit from speaking with colleagues who have been through similar situations.

o Debrief journalists after they return from hostile online environments. This has two benefits: the journalist can talk about their experiences and the manager can piece together a picture of the environment in which the journalist has been working, which may help others going into similar circumstances.

o Remind their colleagues of the value of their work. It may be helpful to give context to the attacks, which are not personal, even though they may feel that way, and are likely motivated by a desire to attack mainstream media. In many cases, harassers have not even read the work; research shows that 59% of stories shared on Facebook are not read by the sharer[1].

o Consider initiating speaking sessions and listening groups after attacks to create safe spaces where people can talk and share experiences.

o Remind people what is available in terms of mental health support and what specific resources they can access, be that employee assistance, counseling or peer support programs. Normalize the idea that seeking support is as an appropriate response to an abnormal experience, and that it is confidential and will not negatively affect the person's career.

o Consider journalism investigations of online violence. This makes it more likely that the public at large will start recognizing its impact, and also holds accountable those perpetuating online harm. The BBC's Marianna Spring, among other journalists, spoke with one of her trolls and got him to apologize[2]. This may be something that could become a cross-industry exercise, such as the Daphne Project[3], which was set up after the journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was murdered in Malta following online threats.

o Ensure those impacted by online harm feel validated and not overburdened. It's been a really exhausting and trying few years, and journalists are human beings, not cogs in a machine.

o As a manager, remember to practice self-care and to recognize what you are asking of your colleagues and yourself.

1. The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists, UNESCO
2. Postcard: Marianna Spring—Academy Events (bbc.co.uk)
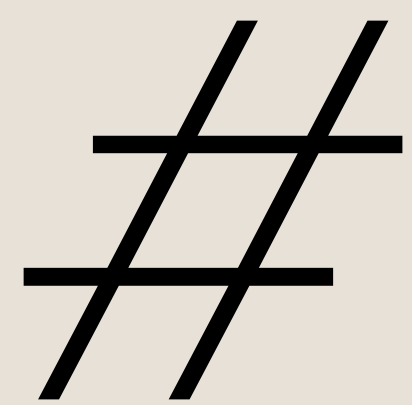3. The Daphne Project—OCCRP

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o 'A modern-day equivalent of the Wild West': Preparing journalism students to be safe online, Journalism Education.

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o The Human Side of News Engagement Emotion Platform and Individual Agency, Avery Holton, Valerie Belaire-Gagnon and Cindy Royal, Digital Journalism.

o Attacks and Harassment, Trollbusters and International Women's Media Foundation.

Resources

o A Twitter Tightrope Without a Net: Journalists' Reactions to Newsroom Social Media Policies, The Tow Center for Digital Journalism.

o Six perspectives on newsroom social media policies, The Tow Center for Digital Journalism.

o Speak Up & Stay Safe(r): A Guide to Protecting Yourself From Online Harassment, Feminist Frequency.

o Vita Activa – Línea de Ayuda | +52155-8171-1117 | (vita-activa.org)

o Towards an Early Warning System for Violence Against Women Journalists, International Center for Journalists.

o Coalition Against Online Violence

o TrollBusters

o OnTheLine, International Press Institute.

o Online Harassment Field Manual, PEN America.

o Online Harassment of Journalists: Attack of the Trolls, Reporters Without Borders.

o Google is releasing an open source harassment filter for journalists, The Verge.

Further Reading

o This is what it's like to be a media company's first-ever online safety editor, Hanaa' Tameez, NiemanLab.

o Gender-based online violence spikes after prominent media attacks, Megan Brown, Zeve Sanderson, and Maria Alejandra Silva Ortega, TechStream.

o The fight to stop online abuse against women, The Guardian Members.

o Indian journalist Rana Ayyub receives rape, death threats, Committee to Protect Journalists.

o I've lost track of how many threats I've received. That's how common online hate is, Joanna Chiu, The Toronto Star.

o Social media moderators are like the paramedics of the internet – and they're right in the firing line of trolls, Nicolle White, ABC News.

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