

Hello everyone and welcome to the third and final lesson of this course.

During the last session, I talked about VPNs and most secure communication applications.

During this lesson, we will not only talk about the available tech tools that we can use if we experience online harassment, but about the actions that we can take, and other tools that are available to us, whether online or in our offline circles. We will talk more about what are the consequences online harassment have on journalists and what can be done when being the target of an online abuse.

It is important to note that online harassment has a lot of consequences on any person who experiences it. These consequences are not only professional ones, and go beyond the mere fact of intimidating the person. The consequences of online harassment can be very serious!

People have different reactions towards online harassment. These reactions can range from complete indifference to an ongoing trauma. The reaction is not only related to how a person interacts when exposed to violence, but is also related to the type of violence and how severe it was.

For example, a campaign of recurrent hate speech and threats will most likely have more serious consequences on the person who is exposed to it than a single tweet including name-calling or embarrassing content. Another example, online harassment of a sexual nature tends to have more impact on people who identify as women than it has on people who identify as men.

First and foremost, online harassment has serious consequences on a psychological level. Online abuse can be potentially life-threatening for victims as well as their family, friends and local communities.

Online harassment has a considerable impact on victims, many of them usually report living with stress, anxiety, panic attacks or depression as well as lower self-esteem as a result. Regarding journalists, many studies have shown that journalists who experience sexual harassment experience the following symptoms:

- 1- Physical symptoms such as tension headaches and feeling ill, to insomnia and panic attacks
- 2- Emotional symptoms that include reactions such as “bursting into tears” and being afraid to leave their homes
- 3- Behavioral responses such as self-censorship on social media, erasing their personal data, avoiding to comment on social media or limiting their online presence.

Some journalists also reported that, in order to cope with online harassment, they turned off Twitter notifications, deleted unread messages of known harassers, disguised their identity when publishing, reduced the amount of media content they create, and some of them even quit journalism as a direct result of the online harassment.

That said, online harassment does not only violate an individual’s right to live free from violence and to have an online presence, but also undermines democratic exercises and good governance. When journalists feel obliged to automatically censor themselves and limit the amount of content they publish or restrict themselves from having an online presence, online harassment stops being an individual issue, and becomes more broadly a press freedom issue.

Now, let's talk about what can be done. How can journalists respond to online harassment in an effective way?

From my experience, there are two channels of reaction to online harassment:

- The first is to use the tools available online on most social media platforms. These tools can be used depending on the type of harassment.
  - o In case of threats, you need to assess whether the threat is intended to be only online, or is there any risk for this threat to become a physical one, and that the harasser might actually take any action offline. You can usually assess this based on the type of harassment. For example, if the harasser is known, or if they show any sign of stalking or revealing personal information about you that you didn't previously publish online (such as a home address, car plate number, pictures of private reunions, etc.) the threat is probably real and it is recommended to report it to the police. In case you felt that the threat is intended to be exclusively online, you can report the user to the platform you are using, or use the block feature.
  - o The report and block features can also be used when you are receiving insults, name-calling or sexist or racist comments. Also remember to block harassers from being able to send you private messages.
  - o Some journalists prefer to simply ignore the harasser.
  - o In fact, there are no studies confirming the most effective strategies for managing online harassment, but whenever a journalist is experiencing it, they should always:
    - Document the abuse, save conversations and screenshots of all messages, even if deleting them is sometimes relieving, but documentation is important.
    - Reporting the abuse to the employer or the media organization they work for. Media organizations should have policies to protect journalists from this type of abuse, and these policies should include offering to journalists the support they need (from psychological support, to flexible working hours or paid leaves if they were dealing with the aftermath of the harassment, to legal support, or other types of support they find suitable).
- The second channel, which is as important as the first one, is to count on the support systems you have. These support systems can be your family, circle of close friends, colleagues or even supporters on social media channels.
  - o We can't deny how important these support systems are for anyone who is experiencing harassment, especially that the most common consequences of online harassment are the impact they have on a person's mental health, and there is no shame in asking for help in these situations.
  - o What type of support these circles can provide? Aside from being able to help by listening to you, which is an important aspect of support, they can have as well a very practical role in supporting you:
    - For example, when needed, you can ask them to check the social media accounts and/or clean out the emails for you, that way, you won't be intimidated by the messages you are receiving.

- Sometimes, they can have an important role online, helping you report the abuse and reaching out to professionals who can help on this.
- Support social media groups and followers also play an important role in the process: They can either help you from a technical point of view on social media, or they can be strong voices speaking up against the harassers. When you receive encouraging messages of support, always read them, and never underestimate the impact they can have on you and your well-being.

Finally, online harassment is a relatively new phenomenon that we are all learning how to counter and how to protect ourselves from. Many countries still do not consider online harassment as a punishable type of violence, leaving specifically journalists and activists vulnerable to online abuse. And to a certain extent, in some regions of the world, harassment is strategically used by authorities and political electronic armies to silence journalists and activists.

And very recently, with the surge of Covid-19 pandemic and the fast digital transformation we've seen in all industries, concerns about rising levels of scamming and harassment were expressed by many online safety organizations and experts, and we've witnessed a rise of online abuse that has included threats of violence and explicit racism and xenophobia. It is true that many social media platforms are reviewing their community standards in order to respond to this rise of cyber violence, but unfortunately, this change is not happening fast enough during the disruptive times we are experiencing now.

We should remember that Cyber violence breaches international human rights laws and, by exposing online abuse and standing up for our right to express ourselves in a violence-free space, we are not only defending ourselves on an individual level, but also defending freedom of expression as a whole.

Thank you for watching and listening to this lesson. I hope that you will take part in our discussion about this lesson in the discussion forum and I hope that you enjoyed this course over the past 4 weeks.