

Hi, welcome to the first module of online harassment: strategies for journalists' defense.

I am Arzu Geybulla, a freelance journalist from Azerbaijan, currently Istanbul-based from where I continue reporting on Azerbaijan. And I will be your lecturer this week.

Let's start from the obvious - what is online harassment?

online harassment refers to any unwanted verbal or nonverbal behavior that occurs online and which violates the dignity of a person; creates a hostile, degrading, or offensive environment (according to Dart Center's [manual](#) on online harassment) and is an umbrella term used to describe harassment, threats, or malicious embarrassment committed online by one party against another (it can happen against an individual, organization, or a group), according to Pen America's Online Harassment Field [Manual](#).

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According to PEN's glossary of terms, online harassment, also known as cyber harassment/cyber abuse/ and online abuse, includes cyberbullying, cyber-mob attacks, cyberstalking, denial of service (DoS) attacks, doxing, hacking, hateful speech and online threats, message bombing, nonconsensual, intimate images and videos (also often referred to as "revenge porn"), online impersonation, online sexual harassment, trolling and swatting to name a few.

Unfortunately, we won't be able to examine each of these examples at length so please do visit the reading material I have put together for this week including the two manuals I just mentioned.

I will have like to mention a few of the forms for the context of the next part of this video.

Cyber-mob attacks - when a specific target is attacked by a large group that collectively shames, harasses, threatens and/or discredits the target. There are two types of cyber mob attacks - outrage mobs and shaming mobs - they are made of internet users who collectively troll individuals in the hopes of silencing or publicly punishing them.

Hateful speech and online threats - probably the most common and the one you may have heard the most as well. When a person is attacked based on their racial, ethnic, or gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, or disability - this is considered hate speech. Threats made online are meant to be physically and/or sexually intimidating.

I am going to mention two of my favorite forms of online harassment before we move on and that is online sexual harassment - targeted at women more often than men - is a combination of different forms of online harassment include revenge porn, cyberstalking, hateful speech, and online threats.

And the second favorite is trolling. Although the term may have evolved over time, and so has its definition, for the sake of this module I am going to use the one put together in PEN America's manual: "trolling" is defined as repetitive posting of inflammatory or hateful comments online by an individual whose intent is to seek attention, intentionally harm a target, cause trouble and /or controversy, and/or join up with a group of trolls who have already commenced a trolling campaign. There are three types of trolling types according to concern trolling, dogpiling, bot trolling/sockpuppet trolling. The latter applies to writers and journalists mostly - according to the PEN America manual, this latter group comes in two flavors - automated accounts controlled by a code/app mimicking real users used for promoting propaganda to amplify hate or defamation against targeted individuals.

Surely the consequences of these forms of harassment can be challenging especially when these attacks damage journalists' personal reputations, undermining their credibility, embarrassing them to retreat, and finally, silence them.

And one last thing before I move to share my personal story with you is the online environment where many of these different forms of harassment take place. You may be targeted via email, social media platforms, messaging apps, blogging platforms, and even in comments sections under articles written by you.

Later, I will be sharing some recommendations for coping strategies when faced with harassment. And you will learn more about terms such as hacking, doxxing, and spoofing in week three of the course.

My experience with online harassment includes a good mix of the forms I have shared with you. There is trolling, online sexual harassment, hateful speech, and online threats, cyberbullying, and cybermob attacks.

To give you a bit of country context: In countries like Azerbaijan, that do poorly on international rankings of human rights and media freedom organizations, being a journalist is not an easy profession. Not surprisingly for years, independent journalists have been targeted by the ruling government for their work.

This targeting comes in many forms and shapes. Physical intimidation, recurring visits to the local law enforcement for questioning, arrests, detentions, prison sentences, and harassment both online and offline.

For a while, harassment and intimidation against women journalists was not popular. Often, male journalists faced harassment. This also was true for political activists and rights defenders. But in 2012, this pattern was broken. One of Azerbaijan's top investigative journalists found herself in the middle of a harassment campaign. She was blackmailed with intimate videos and pictures taken in her apartment bedroom where she lived at the time. In addition to these videos and photos, she received a note that

said, “whore behave or you will be defamed”. The package intended to scare Khadija Ismayilova and deter her from doing her investigations into the ruling family’s illegal businesses and corruption that was taking place at the top government level.

But this did not stop her from keeping her work, publishing more investigations, and receiving many awards for her journalism work over the years. Even though she paid a heavy price for her work - the intimate videos of Khadija later appeared on government news channels and shared on YouTube - she kept going.

This case also set a precedent for the harassment against many other women journalists and activists to come - in the notes for this lecture i will be leaving a link that describes some of the recent cases ([Azerbaijan: Women Journalists Under Pressure | Institute for War and Peace Reporting](#)).

One other detail you need to know about Azerbaijan is that it has a complicated relationship with one of its neighbors - Armenia - due to an on-going conflict over Nagorno Karabakh - an enclave that is located on the territory of Azerbaijan but is governed by predominantly ethnic Armenians. The two countries fought a war that ended with a ceasefire in 1994. No solution was reached and the tensions along the frontline kept escalating over the years. The conflict has reached its deadliest point on September 27, of this year.

Between 2009 and 2013 I worked with a small non-for-profit organization that brought together representatives of civil society from both countries for dialogue. Among the groups we worked with, were also journalists from both countries. In 2013, shortly after I returned from facilitating this program I was invited to join a Turkish Armenian newspaper based in Istanbul as an Azerbaijan correspondent.

Having been inspired by the dialogue and my own work in the field of conflict resolution, I realized this was an opportunity to illustrate that working together with Armenian counterparts was possible.

Despite numerous warnings from friends and colleagues that this may not have been such a good idea considering the tense relations between the two countries amid an on-going conflict, I kept my columns at the newspaper.

In April 2014, I had my first encounter with online harassment. I received a message on Facebook that contained a death threat. I was to be killed and buried next to the editor in chief of the newspaper I was writing for (he was killed in 2007 outside the newspaper’s office). The sender said I had three days left.

Thinking this was an isolated case, I took a screenshot and tweeted the threat. But soon, the threat messages started to grow in numbers. There were comments posted under the articles I wrote online. There were comments posted under the interviews I

had given. Most commonly, users accused me of being a traitor for writing for an Armenian paper. In other cases, naming and shaming. Azerbaijani users on Facebook and Twitter were also very active. I started receiving countless rape threats and other forms of harassment from threats of violence to trolls.

My credibility as a journalist became part of a public discussion that at some point turned into systematic harassment. Quickly government newspapers and mouthpiece journalists started publishing stories about the treason I have committed. Eventually, in an attempt to hurt me more, slurs were also started targeting members of my family.

At the time, I did not know that what I was facing was a targeted online harassment campaign. I did not know what to do about it either. One of the first decisions I took as per the advice of the newspaper was to stop my column. The newspaper was worried about my physical safety given their previous experience with journalists who were targeted for working for the newspaper, not to mention the editor-in-chief who was killed.

For some time I thought the harassment was temporary and that it would end and people would forget and move on. But it was not the case. The campaign continued for the following years and although for some time, it was relatively quiet, the harassment picked up once again, this month as Azerbaijan and Armenia restarted the fighting. This time, I was surprised to see some of my friends, who joined the harassment campaign, calling me biased and secretly, or as one friend put it in an email to me "subconsciously" favoring the other side in the conflict, this conclusion was based on a tweet I shared.

Back in 2014, my initial reaction was to close all my social media accounts. I did not know at the time that I could reach out to third parties and seek professional help in addressing the harassers. Getting that content removed or taking legal action against users.

I also didn't know how to react mentally.

This time around, I actually had to deactivate my Facebook, block people on Twitter (around 300 accounts), and limit the audience of my Instagram profile.

I decided to share this experience with you because I wanted to start this module with a personal story. Many journalists who have faced online harassment and abuse like myself, come from different countries where political, cultural, and social contexts differ, which means the type of harassment may also differ.

In Azerbaijan, being a journalist, critical of the government, writing about corruption is enough to be a target. Wanting peace and speaking against military rhetoric, is an act

of treason. In other countries and contexts, journalists are often targeted online for other reasons.

For instance, there is Brianna Wu, a video game developer and a writer who was targeted for having openly talked about the misogyny in the gaming industry in the US. She was forced to leave her home after harassers sent her threats and packages via mail. Wu's story is probably one of the most well-known and may as well be described as the beginning of organized online harassment in the US and elsewhere.

In France, a private group on Facebook called "LOL League" was used to harass women online. Among them were also women journalists like Capucine Piot, who was targeted through the group with a mocking video montage and repeatedly attacked online for years. Another journalist, Florence Porcel was a victim of the job offer hoax. When the video of her fake job interview the group organized was made public, Porcel said she "cried from shame, humiliation, and fear".

Lauren, an online and print reporter based in New England and whose case was mentioned in a [study](#) on online harassment by the Committee to Protect Journalists, said, "sources would contact me through social media to ask me out on dates, on top of the usual harassment through Facebook comments."

Maria Ressa, founder and executive editor of the news website Rappler in the Philippines received online threats of rape, murder, and arrest via social media platforms.

These stories as well as many others are reflected in the findings of the CPJ study which is also available on the list of recommended readings I have put together. According to the results of the study, online harassment was the biggest issue for journalists, with threats of violence or harm coming from trolls, the public, and readers, listeners, and viewers. The harassment the study found, ranged from unsolicited sexual messages on social media platforms to threats of violence, rape, and death. CPJ survey found that the online threats often accompanied or implied plans to attack a journalist in real-life.

In 2018, a [joint study](#) by the International Women Media Foundation and Troll-Busters.com - another two important and valuable organizations to keep in mind, concluded that online attacks against women journalists have become more visible and coordinated in the past five years. I would only add that, this is still the case, two years after the study was published. Respondents interviewed for the IWMMF/TrollBusters report said physical, sexual, and online abuse became part of their daily work lives. And that the burden is especially hard for freelance reporters.

Although you all have links to the study I just mentioned, I would like to share with you, the three main areas of threats and harassment faced online identified by the report:

1. Direct harassment which refers to things that people do directly to one another. Examples include: being called offensive names, being threatened physically, and being stalked.
2. Invasion of privacy refers to harms done to the victim through the unauthorized access to and exposure or spreading of information beyond the owner's control. Experiences include: being hacked, having information about or images of persons exposed online without their permission, being impersonated, being monitored, and being tracked online.
3. Denial of access occurs when someone uses the features of the technology or platform to harm the victim, usually by preventing access to essential digital tools or platforms. Examples include: sending a very large number of unwanted messages, rendering the account unusable; misuse of reporting tools so that the person is blocked from using a platform; and technical attacks that overwhelm a device, site, server, or platform and prevent access to it.

Often, measures to tackle different forms of online harassment vary based on the countries we are based in, the legal system in place, and the overall approach to harassment. Having said this, even in countries that are relatively safe for journalists, receiving hateful comments is the norm for many women journalists. For instance, one study looking at 70million reader comments on The Guardian newspaper between 2006-2016 showed that articles authored by female journalists saw a higher proportion of comments rejected by moderators, especially in news sections with high concentration of male writers. Still, there are some steps that you can take yourself, like taking care of your digital hygiene and making sure your accounts/devices are secure; as well as identify coping mechanisms and strategies for protecting your mental health. You will hear more about this in the following lectures led by Ela, Catherine, and Myra.

My story is not different from countless other stories shared by women journalists over the years. The way we chose to handle it differed.

Maria Ressa for instance chose to expose the threats and not keep silent. Similarly, in my case, shortly after I realized this was not going to stop any time soon, I embarked on a journey of documenting my harassers and exposing the harshest of the criticisms and threats (especially when messages contained death threats). I started a folder, where I kept adding links to stories, screenshots of comments and any other documentation of harassment I was facing. I also made sure that my accounts on social media platforms, as well as email, were protected. I secured my devices with password protection and encryption to avoid having to deal with yet another problem if under the threat of facing hacking, phishing or any other form of invasion of privacy.

In addition, having documentation on the hand of different types of online threats I was getting, was comforting even though it may sound strange. Two years after my first online death threat, I wrote my first story about what happened – and how that experience helped to document and report on the government-sponsored trolling in Azerbaijan and how that in combination with online harassment was used against critics

of the government. I spoke openly about my experience, not shying away from sharing some of those messages and comments I received. In 2018, as I was working on a story about online harassment I identified my top “favorite” messages and reached out to the authors asking them whether they regretted saying what they did. To my surprise, only one apologized.

Over the years, I also discovered the many organizations that helped women journalists around the world to tackle online harassment, expose it, but also, engage in multi-stakeholder conversations to prevent or at least, lessen the damage for those on the receiving end of these threats.

One of these organizations was the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media that was organizing meetings where the representatives from different organizations would come together to address online harassment which was increasingly becoming an obstacle to doing journalism. It was there that I met many other women journalists from Turkey, Turkmenistan, to the US and Europe who have experienced online harassment in one way or another. (<https://www.osce.org/fom/who-we-are>)

This week you will be meeting two of the women I met during these gatherings. My first guest speaker is Jennifer Adams, who worked at the Office for the OSCE RFoM and who was the producer of a documentary film A Dark Place made in partnership with the International Press Institute.

We are going to talk about the film, some of the stories featured in the film, and how over the years, countless meetings and events organized, international response mechanisms to online harassment has developed and where it stands today.

My second guest speaker is Banu Guven, a Turkish journalist who is featured in the film as well. We are going to discuss Banu’s experience, the measures she took to address and cope with the harassment and her recommendations to the journalists.