Countering Online Abuse and Harassment of Journalists: Guidelines for Newsrooms in West Africa

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Table of Contents

About the Author

Gideon Sarpong is a policy analyst and media practitioner with close to a decade of experience in policy, data, and investigative journalism. Gideon is a co-founder of iWatch Africa and currently the director of policy and news. His work includes designing strategic project and policy focus for the organization and leading iWatch's digital rights initiative.

Gideon is a fellow of the Young African Leaders Initiative, Thomson Reuters Foundation and Bloomberg's Data for Health Initiative. He is also a policy leader fellow at the European University Institute, School of Transnational Governance, in Florence, a 2020 fellow of the Open Internet for Democracy Leaders program and a journalist fellow and visiting scholar at the University of Oxford, UK.

Gideon is a firm believer in promoting a safe, secure, and inclusive digital ecosystem. He can be reached at gideonsarpong@iwatchafrica.org.

Introduction

While ever-increasing access to the internet and social media has created enormous opportunities, including improving communication and facilitating the exchange of views and information, these platforms have become a new front line in journalism safety—and a particularly dangerous place for women journalists.

In West Africa, for the many journalists who report on contested social, economic, and political issues, the social media ecosystem has become a place of prolific, often brutal online harassment and abuse, including targeted attacks that frequently involve threats of physical and sexual violence. This represents a real danger to the "democratization" of freedom of expression.

In 2020, UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists conducted a survey on online violence against women in 15 countries, including Ghana and Nigeria. They found that 73 percent of women journalists who participated in the survey had experienced online violence, with Facebook and Twitter ranked as some of the least safe platforms for female journalists.

Award-winning Nigerian journalist Ruona Meyer was targeted in a campaign of extreme online harassment which lasted almost a year following publication of her BBC investigation into Nigeria's cough syrup cartels.

iWatch Africa has also previously tracked over 10,000 online abuse and harassment cases directed at journalists in Ghana. These incidents aimed to undercut press freedom and chill critical journalism and it is representative of what's happening in other countries across the continent.

These guidelines specify steps and measures that newsrooms and journalists in West Africa can take to mitigate the problem of online abuse. The risks that online harassment poses to the free flow of information, press freedom, and the democratic exchange of ideas demand an urgent response.

These guidelines were developed by Gideon Sarpong based on data collected as part of his work at iWatch Africa. Altogether, Sarpong interviewed over 30 experts, including several digital rights advocates, civil society representatives, and journalists from more than 15 newsrooms across West Africa between November 2020 and

February 2021. iWatch Africa held two virtual events with female journalists and digital rights experts to discuss the impact of online harassment on women journalists in West Africa. The proposals that emerged from those discussions were incorporated into these guidelines.

This guide was modeled after research published by UNESCO and the International Press Institute. It is specifically tailored to meet the unique demands and resource constraints facing newsrooms in West Africa.

It is being published as part of the Open Internet Leaders program and is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all set of instructions, but a starting point for newsroom managers in West Africa to devise a system that works for their particular circumstances and that can be sustained in the long term.

Additional tools and resources have also been incorporated into this guide to ease its adoption and mainstreaming process in newsrooms in West Africa.

Step 1: Build Digital Rights Literacy in the Newsroom

According to the [African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights](), digital rights are, in effect, human rights in the digital era. They protect citizens' equal-opportunity rights to exercise their freedom of expression and to access information online without discrimination.

Digital rights literacy is vital in effectively countering online violence and abuse targeted at journalists. Understanding issues related to digital rights is an important step in addressing the psychological, physical, and digital safety impacts associated with this escalating [freedom of expression crisis](). It is also important in helping journalists participate in discussions and debates for policy development and change, understand how human rights apply online, and be aware when their rights have been violated.

For the purposes of this guide, digital rights literacy focuses on improving a journalist's understanding of the [Democratic Principles for an Open Internet](), a set of internet governance rights and principles rooted in international human rights standards, to better apply these principles to their work.

A. Training and Awareness Creation

Newsroom managers must initiate digital rights literacy programs that are inclusive and gender sensitive to ensure that there is equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized based on gender or sexual orientation.

Use and share training resources:

- Create a simple training module for journalists in the organization. The Media Legal Defence Initiative (MLDI) has a comprehensive [training module]() that can help you design a training program for journalists.

- Use an online course or training manual. Some, like MLDI's module, are already available for free online. This will allow journalists to easily share training material with their peers and spread the word. Putting your training course or informational material online will also save you some resources, like venue and travel costs.

- Record any face-to-face trainings you have conducted and include them on the online platform.
- Consider making the course multilingual, especially if you are working in a location with multiple language groups.

Hold meet-ups with journalists:

- **Formal:** Establish regular lectures on digital rights and an open forum where journalists can ask questions and share their ideas on how digital rights are or are not being applied in the online space.
- **Informal:** Set up nontraditional events, such as tea or coffee gatherings, with journalists.

B. Knowledge Sharing

- Create accessible and understandable content that takes all journalists into account. Consider different forms of content like videos, podcasts, images, art, audio, or text.
- Create a method for continuous engagement, such as a Signal or email group. This will enable journalists to continue to discuss, report, and exchange relevant information on digital rights issues.
- Post engaging content on digital rights to your online community.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES:

- **Training Materials**
  - Multimedia training kit on human rights and the internet
  - The Democratic Principles for an Open Internet (videos)

- **International Frameworks and Conventions on Human Rights in the Digital Space**
  - African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms

- **Training Platforms**
  - Open edX offers the option to customize its online learning platform either through a service provider or a self-service deployment (requires more technical knowledge and resources).

Step 2: Establish Safety Practices

A. Newsroom Culture

- Send an email to all staff making it clear that the media organization takes online violence and abuse very seriously. This measure is important for building confidence in the newsroom. It sends two important messages: First, it helps debunk the widespread feeling among journalists that being targeted with abuse on social media is the new normal; and second, it gives journalists a sense of security that the media organization will support them.

- Establish regular meetings between social media teams and journalists to carry out a "health check" related to journalists' work on social media or engagement on online comment sections.

- Newsroom managers and editors should make company policies on online harassment visible and accessible. They should also ensure that employees are familiar with the tools and protocols the company has created to deal with the issue (e.g., posters in newsrooms).

B. Reporting Lines and Channels

All staff members and contributors should know whom to report abuse to and how to report it. Newsrooms should create various channels through which attacks can be easily reported and that allow journalists to access support mechanisms.

Informal reporting mechanism:

- Encourage informal talks with colleagues: Newsrooms should encourage journalists to share experiences of harassment with their peers and editors. Journalists should be encouraged to use chat groups to report online abuse.

Formal reporting mechanisms:

Formal reporting mechanisms create an expectation of action. Therefore, it must be made clear to journalists and other staff members who is responsible for receiving the reports and what steps that person can take.

- Create an online form where targeted journalists can easily report an online attack. The form should be short and easy to fill in, but cover all essential information related to the attack.

- Create a specific email address where journalists can report online harassment.
- Newsrooms should ensure that coordinators of reporting mechanisms include representation from women and minorities. They should also make sure that all coordinators have been made sensitive to the specific types of attacks targeting women and minorities.

C. Online Attacks and Harassment

- Create a database to keep track of reported incidences of online harassment and information about the responses taken. This could be as simple as using a Google form.
- Take screenshots of abuses.

Step 3: Complete a Risk Analysis

Conducting a thorough risk assessment is important to determine which type of support is most appropriate in the event of an online attack.

A. Risk of Physical Harm

Factors to consider:

- Overall online environment (e.g., frequency of online attacks leading to physical attacks on the press, impunity for such attacks, climate of generalized animosity toward the press).

- In the case of an individual aggressor, assessment of risk of physical attack based on known information about this individual.

- In the case of campaigns, likelihood that individuals will feel encouraged or legitimized to carry out a physical attack.

- The public nature of the journalist's work: How recognizable is he or she in public places?

B. Risk of Psychological Harm

Factors to consider:

- Intensity of the harassment, both in content and frequency.

- Presence of discriminatory content (e.g., based on gender, race, sexual orientation), which can have a particularly serious impact on the target.

- Presence of traumatic imagery.

- Messages that indicate stalking behavior, which can generate fear and insecurity.

- Strength of the target's overall support network.

- Target's psychological state (signs of depression or trauma).

C. Risk of Reputational Harm

Factors to consider:

- Degree of polarization and hostility toward media present in society.

- Potential for the smears to be considered credible by the public.

- Volume and reach of attacks and smear campaigns, including factors that can allow online attacks to spread more quickly, such as attacks using memes or elaborate graphic designs, botnets, and labels; and smears that have the potential to be recycled in the future.

- An indication that smear campaigns have been orchestrated on behalf of political, economic, or other interests.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES:

- In West Africa, the Media Foundation for West Africa provides support to journalists who face extreme dangers as a result of their work.

- Free Press Unlimited also provides support for journalists who face intense harassment online.

Step 4: Implement Support Mechanisms

J ournalists should be able to function as independent actors and as change catalysts within society. These support mechanisms help ensure that journalists can do their work without fear of harm or abuse.

A. Digital Security Support

Minimizing harm:

- Block the users behind attacks, even if they have posted the threats from anonymous accounts on social media.

- Lock down all of the target's accounts, changing their passwords and taking other such measures to minimize risk.

- The newsroom manager may offer to take over the target's social media accounts so that the target is not exposed to further abuse.

Preventive measures:

- Make journalists aware of personal details that are accessible to the public through social media accounts. See if any sensitive information has been exposed involuntarily.

- Train journalists to scan their electronic devices to identify potential vulnerabilities that might allow hackers to access their personal data and publicly expose it.

B. Legal Support

Factors to consider before legal action is taken:

- Whether the post contains illegal content according to your jurisdiction.

- The likelihood that bringing a case will deter future online aggressors in general.

- The likelihood that bringing a case will deter the actions of the specific aggressor in this case.

- The possibility that, given the particular context, pursuing legal action will spotlight the particular journalist and amplify and encourage further attacks.

- Whether legal action could unwittingly reinforce stories that online aggressors may already be selling about "powerful" media organizations attacking the "little guy," potentially fueling further harassment.

- Whether the attack appears to have been perpetrated by an individual acting alone or someone participating in a coordinated campaign. In the latter case, legal action may be counterproductive and provoke further attacks.

- The potential impact on the journalist affected. Will a legal case bring satisfaction to the affected journalist, or will it cause further emotional harm?

- Whether prosecutors have also taken up a criminal case, in which case it may be easier to support that effort.

C. Emotional and Psychological Support

Professional psychological support:

- Professional mental health support can play an important role in helping mitigate the consequences of online abuse and harassment of journalists. Because this form of support could place additional financial burden on newsrooms in West Africa, a list of organizations that offer free support has been included at the end of this section.

Peer support:

- For journalists targeted with online abuse and harassment, colleagues who have endured similar experiences can be an important source of strength and knowledge of how best to cope with the attacks and their potential consequences.

- Develop a formal network of staff members in the newsroom who are available to listen to the experiences of their peers who have been targeted with online abuse and walk them through ways of coping with the effects.

Mentoring programs:

- Assign a senior journalist to mentor less-experienced colleagues.

- Mentors should help mentees recognize online abuse, the topics that typically lead to it, and the forms that it may take.

- A chat group using an encrypted messaging app like Signal or a similar program can be used not only to report threats, but also to provide support in case of attacks.

- Editors should be encouraged to create opportunities to discuss the issue of online harassment in group settings.

D. Temporary Leave, Relocation, and/or Reassignment

Based on an assessment of the emotional distress of the targeted journalist, a brief temporary leave can minimize potential trauma. Granting leave in such situations is a common practice in newsrooms.

A journalist, depending on the nature of the threat, could also be relocated or reassigned to protect his or her life.

E. Public Statement of Support

For the news organization, showing public support for a journalist under attack sends the message that the organization stands behind its staff and views attacks on its journalists as an attack on the institution as a whole. However, these factors should be considered before a statement is issued:

- Will it amplify the attack?

- Will it lead to further harassment?

- Will it harm any legal case that the news organization is considering filing?

F. Moderating Online Content

A thorough, well-developed strategy to moderate user comments is necessary to ensure that attacks targeting journalists and news organizations, alongside other unacceptable comments, are swiftly removed.

Preventing online abuse:

- Develop community guidelines that can serve as key tools for both users and moderators. These participation guidelines will make clear that criticism is welcome, but insults, attacks, hate, and threats will not be tolerated. Refer to _The Guardian's_ community standards as a guide.

- Set up a registration scheme on your website. It is good practice to ask users to register to be able to comment. This requirement is important not only in view of potential legal liabilities but also as an initial hurdle to dissuade aggressors and machine-operated accounts.

- Block the ability to comment at certain times. If there are times, such as overnight or during weekends, when moderators cannot dedicate sufficient time to the task, consider blocking the possibility to comment for the relevant period of time. If you do so, make sure to inform your users when they will be able to post comments again.

Moderating and reacting to online abuse:

Keep in mind that removing online attacks, threats, and insults targeting journalists does not eliminate the risk of physical violence emanating from the aggressor. Moderators who see aggressive messages aimed at a journalist, particularly those that contain a threat, should not only remove those messages, but also bring them to the attention of relevant persons in the news organization, including the target of such attacks.

On-site comments:

- **Removing comments:** Comments that do not fall within the confines of legitimate criticism and are in breach of the community guidelines, even if they do not threaten a journalist, should be removed. It is good practice to inform users why their comments were removed.

- Warn users who repeatedly breach the community guidelines: A good way of doing so is to block their ability to post comments for a period of time.

Managing online abuse on social media:

- **Facebook:**
    - Delete a comment when it contains aggressive or threatening content or derogatory words and insults.
    - Ban a user from the media outlet's Facebook page when the user has repeatedly posted hateful or abusive comments, even after being warned.
    - Remove a user from the page as a warning to deter further abusive comments.
    - Disable/turn off comments. Consider doing this when there are very limited resources available to moderate content.

- **Twitter:**
  - Block words and set the strength of the profanity filter.
  - Report a post, page, or user that has breached social media's own community standards.
  - Muting: Consider muting a user when their posts are in violation of your community standards. Muting a user removes their activities from your timeline. This tool is available on Twitter.
  - Blocking: Moderators generally adopt this measure as a last resort, tending to block accounts that persistently spam or send scams. Note that since the moderator will not be able to access the blocked account, it makes it difficult to monitor any imminent threat.

G. Basic Online Security Training for Journalists

- Train journalists to identify and use end-to-end encryption apps for communication (e.g., Signal).
- Encourage journalists to use a secure email service (e.g., Proton Mail).
- Ensure journalists use strong passwords. Refer to Google's guidelines on how to create a strong password.
- Train journalists to use two-factor authentication for log-in approval.
- Encourage journalists to check a site's URL. Does the URL start with "http://" or "https://"? An *s* at the end means the connection is encrypted and secure, so any data entered are safely sent to the website. Avoid sharing any personal information on websites without this added layer of security.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES:

- Money Trail and Free Press Unlimited have a free resource on security training for newsrooms and journalists, which can be accessed here.
- The Media Legal Defence Initiative provides legal help to journalists, citizen journalists, and independent media worldwide.
- The International Women's Media Foundation offers safety training, reporting trips, and byline opportunities, all tailored to female journalists—both established and up-and-coming.

- The Committee to Protect Journalists defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal.
- The Global Investigative Journalism Network provides free monthly training programs for journalists across Africa.
- The International Federation of Journalists has a "safety fund" that offers financial assistance in a range of emergency cases such as threats, violence, prosecution, settlement in exile, and illness.
- Pen International supports journalists at a grassroots level to protect, shelter, and resettle writers at risk globally.
- Article 19 does advocacy on digital rights and media freedom.
- Shelter City provides human rights defenders including journalists who are threatened because of their work a shelter in the Netherlands.
- Dart Center has a resource unit which provides mental health support for journalists who suffer trauma as part of their work.

Step 5: Assign Roles and Tasks

These roles and tasks can be performed by multiple people or by just one individual if there are resource constraints.

A. Online Safety Coordinator

- Acts as a figure to whom journalists can report incidents of online harassment.
- Assesses, in coordination with the targeted journalist and their editor, each case of online harassment and suggests support mechanisms for the targeted journalist.
- Where necessary, coordinates with management and legal experts on any institutional response by the media outlet.
- Keeps the database of online abuse cases updated to follow and evaluate the efficiency of measures implemented.
- Due to the changing nature of online attacks, regularly reviews the measures that the newsroom has in place to prevent and respond to online harassment.
- Acts as a coordination and educational point for these measures. The online safety coordinator should be deeply familiar with all newsroom measures, able to explain them to journalists facing online abuse, and the primary point person for their implementation.
- Regularly attends editorial meetings to become aware of upcoming content that may trigger online abuse.

B. Management

- Acknowledges that online harassment is a serious concern and that an attack on one staff member is an attack on the entire media organization. Communicates this position regularly to the newsroom.
- Adopts structural changes in the newsroom to create an environment in which reporting online abuse is not stigmatized. Ensures that sufficient resources, time, and funding are allocated to maintain and update these new structures.
- Appoints one or several online safety coordinators, as described above.
- Includes the targets of online attacks in decision-making processes that affect them.

C. Editors

- Acknowledge that online abuse is a serious and unacceptable issue and not simply a characteristic of modern journalism.

- Regularly include online harassment as a topic in editorial meetings. Speaking openly about the issue will create an atmosphere in which journalists will feel more comfortable reporting attacks.

D. Moderators

- Identify individual threats and orchestrated campaigns on social media platforms and comments sections targeting staff members, record them in a database, and escalate them to the journalist, editor, and online safety expert.

- Help assess the threat level of the online abuse.

- Assist in managing targeted journalist's social media accounts to reduce their exposure to violent content and minimize potential trauma.

E. Journalists

- Understand that online abuse is a serious and unacceptable issue and not simply a characteristic of today's journalism.

- Participate in all relevant training opportunities offered by the media outlet, including awareness, digital security, and trauma risk management training.

- Participate in both formal and informal peer support structures.

- Report issues of online abuse when they occur, even if the journalists do not believe they will suffer any negative consequences from the abuse. Reporting these incidents helps the newsroom understand the scope of the issue and develop the measures necessary to counter it.