

Online trolls, journalism and the freedom of speech: Are the bullies taking over?

This paper explores the legal and ethical challenges faced by journalists in retaining open channels of discourse online. Quantitative and qualitative research involving twenty experienced reporters, twenty new media industry recruits and forty journalism undergraduates assesses the extent to which internet trolls impacted on their work. It found that while the sample was required to have an online presence and to interact with their audiences through social media, they received little guidance in dealing with abuse and threats. A significant number, including the journalism students developing their online presence, felt that hostile experiences had affected their ability to express themselves freely. This has an impact on a journalist's critical role as a guardian of free speech in a democratic society. Social media adds to the pressures on journalists and raises concerns over the effectiveness of existing complaint mechanisms. A case is made for more support from both educators and the media industry to ensure these freedoms are not eroded.

Keywords: internet, trolls, journalism, freedom, social media

Introduction

Trollology has become part of the debate around the power shift of the media and public online, with potentially damaging implications when it comes to journalists making comments on the web. Increasingly journalists are being required to have an online presence and to interact with their audiences. This is identified by media owners as a way of engaging more 'eyeballs' and potentially driving up profits.

Being visible online for those working in the media, and particularly for those starting jobs, has become critical for career development.

Yet there is little guidance for those entering the media professions to help them navigate their way through the legal and ethical pitfalls of engaging with hostile commentators online. This paper explores the challenges faced by seasoned journalists in retaining open channels of discourse online and probes the level of coping strategies made available, particularly for newer graduate entrants in the media sector. Undergraduate journalism students are also questioned about their experiences and asked for their views on the need for support while developing their online profiles.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative research was undertaken. There were twenty semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with journalists. Another twenty journalism graduates working in journalism or media communications roles completed questionnaires and follow-up semi-structured interviews were undertaken with five of them. These two groups had developed their online profiles and blogged and or tweeted either as a promotional tool or as part of a media company requirement. They were asked if they engaged with their audiences as part of their jobs and were asked to provide details of their experiences. This included a reflection on whether they felt hostility online had affected the topics they wrote about and the way they expressed themselves. They were also asked if an online presence was a requirement of the job and whether they were provided with legal and ethical guidelines to help them undertake this task. The issue of whether or not they felt they had sufficient support for this role was also explored.

Quantitative and qualitative data was also extracted from a questionnaire completed by 40 journalism undergraduates, about 5 per cent of them already working online as part of their career development. They were asked about their experiences and asked about the sort of guidance they used and what they felt would be beneficial to help them in this task.

Literature review

The internet, in its original conception, was seen as a forum for freedom of expression. 'The kind of communication that thrives on the internet is that related to free expression in all its forms' (Castells 2001: 200 in McQuail 2009). Journalism in its purest sense is seen as a profession

that helps to bring important issues to the public's attention and to engage in discussion and debate (McQuail 2009: 283). These are seen as central tenets of a democratic society in the tradition of the press acting as the 'fourth estate'. The development of web 2.0 enabled interaction with the public in new and dynamic ways, opening up multiple channels of discourse. This has 'altered the interaction between politics, the media and the public, beyond recognition' (Sambrook 2006 in Allan 2006: 169).

Democratisation became feasible via comment (Trygg 2012) bringing freedom online and for the media. 'Trolling and other negative behaviour on magazine websites is widespread, ranging from subtly provocative behaviour to outright abuse.' Publishers have sought to develop lively online communities, with high levels of user-generated content. Methods of building sites have developed quickly, but methods of managing them have lagged behind. Trygg (2012) felt some publishers had become 'overwhelmed' by the size and behaviours of the communities they had created. The research identified 'walled gardens' where publishers could encourage constructive posting, and take a more active part in site management.

Media publishers were quick to identify that engagement online was a way to drive up revenue (Binns 2012; Trygg 2012; MacKinnon and Zuckerman 2012). In all corners of the world, media outlets seeking to boost audiences through titillation and controversy have effectively built troll-baiting and troll-feeding into their business models. Commentators gain power by inciting their followers to react emotionally and even violently to trolls (MacKinnon and Zuckerman 2012).

Although online interaction was found to attract some hateful comments there was a natural reluctance to censor material no matter how bad. Singer (2009) notes that censorship issues make journalists' 'skin crawl' but became necessary with moderation.

Trolls' methods and motives

Cunningham (in Gillmor 2004) defines trolls as those who deliberately set out to waste people's time and energy: 'A troll is a time thief. To troll is to steal from people. That is what makes trolling heinous.' Hardaker (2010: 237) says they can cause disruption for their own amusement pretending they want to be part of the group. Hardaker and Donath (1999) defined a troll as one who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group, while

really aiming to cause disruption for their own amusement.

Additionally, it also involves the use of false or incorrect utterances to generate negative or aggressive responses from the users in social media (Morrissey 2010). Morrissey says one of the motives of trolling is to embarrass the recipient by making them seem foolish. They intend to hurt their victims for pleasure. King (1996) proposes that trolling allows users' identities to be kept anonymous and this anonymity allows users to converse about issues that would be too sensitive for face-to-face interaction. In addition, some internet users engage in trolling for attention seeking. This is supported by Bishop (2013) who suggests that trolling is an effect of de-individuation where inner restraints are lost when people are not seen or paid attention to as individuals. As a result, trolls will target their victims, consciously and purposefully as a way to discomfort them.

University of Manitoba research (in Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhus 2013) demonstrated that trolls have serious personality issues such as Machiavellianism. Online commentators displayed traits that are narcissistic, psychopathic and sadistic and the worse the problems, the longer the person spent online. The most common trait was to exhibit sadistic behaviour (ibid).

MacKinnon and Zuckerman (2012) coined the phrase 'Don't feed the trolls.' 'The troll "wins" when discussions descend into virtual shouting matches.' If someone is trying to incite you, don't bother responding, as your angry attention is exactly what the troll wants. Censoring trolls rarely succeeds – they tend to return, even more disruptive than before, using new monikers. Instead, the best way to silence trolls is to ignore them (ibid).

Troll tactics for disrupting online debate include digressing from the topic, excessively criticising someone by focusing on something like their grammar rather than the content, manipulating egos and sensitivities within the group to trigger emotional responses, pretending to counsel while being hurtful, shocking people by poking fun at sensitive or taboo topics and just being aggressive for the sake of it (Hardaker 2013). They can be 'deliberately aggressing' other people, without any clear justification and with the aim of antagonising others into retaliating. Taboo and sensitive topics, which attract vitriolic comment include religion, death, politics, human rights and animal welfare, Hardaker says.

There are a variety of ways in which trolls can target people ranging from cyberbullying, doxing (the posting of personal details like address or social security number) and making direct threats of violence. There are 'outrage mobs' as documented in a book by Ronson, a journalist who became the victim of an attack himself (Ronson 2015) and troll armies who descend on their targets *en masse*. He calls these public shamings the modern-day equivalent of a 'town square flogging' (ibid: 44) delivered like 'remotely administered drone strikes', pointing out that 'the snowflake needs to feel responsible for the avalanche'.

Social media channels

Media outlets were struggling to cope with moderation on their websites, not least due to cost factors and gradually public online debate switched to social media sites, with journalists being on the frontline. It started with a landmark decision by *PopularScience.com* in 2013. LeBarre posted: 'Comments can be bad for science. That's why, here at *PopularScience.com*, we're shutting them off' (2013). They said they were committed to fostering lively, intellectual debate as they were to spreading the word of science far and wide. 'The problem is when trolls and spambots overwhelm the former, they diminish their ability to do the latter.' This was followed by the *Chicago Sun-Times* suspending its comment feature, CNN disabling comments on most stories and Reuters dropping comments, saying that social media is a better place for discussion (Finley 2015). *Recode* followed, stating that social media was a better forum, and the *Week* relaunched with no comments in 2015 (Finley 2015).

Bloomberg digital editor Joshua Topolsky (2015) said they were more comfortable engaging with readers on external social platforms, where they were likely to reach a more representative percentage of the audience (O'Donovan 2015). Also in 2015 tech news site the *Verge* suspended comments for most articles, *WIRED* launched a new 'short post' format, which does not include a comments section and the *Daily Dot* switched off comments stating 'a mob can shout down all the other people on your site' if you were not actively monitoring it and 'it becomes about silencing voices and not about opening up voices' (BBC 2015a). The *Daily Beast* followed, saying most debate had now shifted to social media sites. *Vice Motherboard* replaced its comments feature with a weekly 'letters to the editor' feature in 2015, stating: 'What's the point of writing out a detailed thought when it's sandwiched by cur-

sory garbage?' (Mead 2015). However, the editor admitted that social media could be 'just as abrasive an alternative'. In the same year, *Reddit* launched its news site *Upvoted* which excludes a comments section and stops users from being able to 'upvote' items directly on the site (Finley 2015).

The London *Guardian* shut down comments on some contentious topics as trolls were 'disruptive to the conversation and very, very difficult to mitigate' and prevented opposing views being properly aired (Hamilton 2016). 'Writers who touch on tricky subjects – race, gender, Israel, migration – or whose work reaches an unexpectedly broad audience can often find themselves on the receiving end of abuse and agenda trolling as well as reasoned debate and criticism.'

The BBC (2015a) also cut down on comment on its website citing shouting, swearing, incivility, racism and sexism as causing problems, with evidence of issues with the live streaming app *Periscope*. Some publications such as the *Mail Online*, one of the world's biggest news website, focused on driving traffic through controversy and, as Gore (2017) states, 'bagged arguably Britain's most provocative commentator' Katie Hopkins, who had already left the *Sun* and the LBC radio network following controversial comments. The *Mail Online* union ended through 'mutual consent', again following controversial comments including some on terrorism.

Journalists under fire: Surveys

A Women in Media survey of 1,054 Australian journalists found 41 per cent of staff journalists and 18 per cent of freelancers are likely to be attacked by trolls (iSentia in O'Brien 2016). According to a Demos report, around 5 per cent of the tweets a female journalist receives are derogatory or abusive, compared to under 2 per cent for male journalists (Edge 2014).

A UK survey by the National Union of Journalists and University of Strathclyde showed reporters had received death threats and 'feared for their safety' with more than 80 per cent saying cyber-bullying extended beyond working hours. More than 80 per cent had not reported the abuse to the police, more than half said it had affected how they worked and more than 40 per cent did not tell their employer (Addicot 2016). The International Federation of Journalists (2015) warned that such online abuse could inhibit the freedom of speech and posed 'a serious threat' to society.

A survey by the US civil liberties group, PEN America, also found online harassment was posing a 'significant threat to free speech' with controversial topics being avoided. Two-thirds of trolled writers refrained from publishing their work, deleted their social media accounts and feared for their personal safety (PEN 2018).

There have been numerous high profile cases including that of Charlotte Dawson, the Australian model turned television presenter who committed suicide after troll attacks (Webb 2014). Comments included: 'Please hang yourself promptly' and 'Neck yourself you filthy s***' (ibid). Dawson, who had a history of depression, was told to 'stick her head in a toaster' and kill herself and finally responded with the message: 'You win x', with a picture of a hand holding tablets and a 'Hope this ends the misery' tweet (O'Brien and Ralston 2014).

In the UK, Chloe Madeley, the daughter of well-known TV presenter Judy Finnigan, faced rape threats after her mother commented on a prominent rape conviction during a TV discussion programme. She said it wasn't a 'violent' rape and that the victim was drunk. She later apologised unreservedly for the comments (Dent 2014). British journalist Liz Jones said she had been affected by trolls and 'woke every day, now, fearful of the next attack' (Jones 2014a).

Investigative journalist Willard Foxton said: 'I've known plenty of people who've quit newspapers rather than put up with the constant stream of bile directed at them,' but he vigorously defends people's rights to comment online (Foxton 2012). Journalist Tauriq Moosa (2014) said: '...if you want almost *guaranteed* hate, be a woman.' She said the internet had become 'an amoral wasteland where only the "fittest" survive – and by "fittest" we usually mean individuals who rarely face prejudice or hostility premised on their gender, race, etc.'

Fighting back

Some journalists fight back. Eliot Higgins, founder of investigative website *Bellingcat*, which claimed to name the Russian agents in the Skripal poisoning, hit back at London's Russian trolls in his comments section stating: 'How about reading the full report, enough information is there, if you still don't get it, try "Google translate"' (Higgins 2018). Well-known British journalist Julie Burchill also refuses to be cowed. Responding to a tweet suggesting she was 'too busy drinking yourself stupid down the Groucho, you selfish old boot', she retort-

ed: 'I've been there three times in the past two decades, you shrivelled old ass-hat' (Burchill 2014).

Burchill states: 'I am tough as old boots. ... And though it's awful when it happens to young girls, whose hormones are all over the show, I can't help thinking that grown women shouldn't react with such hoop-skirted uproar.' She said attacks were 'rather bracing, like a swim in an icy pool on a sleepy morning'. Troll victim and *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones (2013) said:

I've had tweets suggesting that I be shot, creative ways of injuring me, those wondering why my mother didn't abort me, and so on. A low point was EDL members sharing my picture on Twitter and Facebook, suggesting sympathisers keep their eyes peeled, when I attend a counter-demonstration.

He believed it was important to continue putting out comment regardless, but argued that 'those with power and influence must still be held to account and not insulated from disagreement' (ibid). He said the attacks on Caroline Criado-Perez, targeted after she campaigned to have a woman as the new face on a £10 note, had prompted a backlash from the men who 'still cannot bear to accept a woman as their equal'. Abusers who tried to hound, degrade and intimidate women must be defeated, he said. He also called for Twitter to have a button enabling instant action over rape and death threats. His advice was to block trolls or re-tweet their abuse to your followers so they can mock them.

In 2013, Emma Barnett, Women's Editor at the *Daily Telegraph*, and two other female journalists, were sent a bomb threat tweet. Barnett had ignored it and gone to the pub. But police took the issue seriously and the man, who thought he was untraceable, was tracked down and cautioned. Barnett said: 'More people don't want to provoke others, so they start to self-censor what they say if they are trolled. But if you're a journalist, your job is to provoke' (Ridley 2014).

Survival tactics

Shaw (2013) explored the practices that feminist bloggers engage in, finding that tactics include banning comment, disemvowelling (removing vowels from offensive comments), refusing anonymous posts, changing the spelling on abusive posts and publishing comments to let them humiliate themselves. This strategy of 'speaking of the unspeakable' through

'heaping' and accumulation (Tomlinson 2010 in Shaw 2013) is commonly used in feminist blogging networks, for example through the use of the Twitter hashtag #mencallmethings.

Shaw (ibid) found feminist bloggers have used backchannels such as Twitter to provide support for one another and warn each other to watch out for particular people and to moderate them if they are encountered. In this way, many feminist bloggers see moderation as a responsibility that is shared within the network. Such practices promote a sense of safety and community enabling feminist discourse to flourish. Another strategy is the 'feminist carnival' (Gaden 2007 in Shaw 2013) whereby women link up to curate lists of links and posts, creating networks and safe havens.

CreepyPMs within Reddit was set up by College of Charleston Associate Professor Ryan Milner as a safe space and support network for women discussing feminist issues. 'Comments that are not conducive to a supportive and positive environment may be removed, even if they don't violate the rules,' with 30 moderators involved (Moosa 2014).

In the US, researchers have developed a tool called Trollbusters which identifies 'troll nests' and sends positive messages to the victim (Addicot 2016). *Channel 4 News* producer Mike Deri Smith has unmasked a number of trolls, leading to their prosecution, starting with those who targeted Criado-Perez (BBC 2015b).

Nicholas White, editor of the *Daily Dot*, said that if trolls had clearly not read the article they trolled them back pointing out the relevant paragraphs and points. But he said those who were absolutely vicious were ignored and blocked (ibid).

Regulations

There have been few prosecutions in the UK. In January 2014, the NUJ won a landmark case when football supporter David Limond was convicted for threatening reporter, Angela Haggerty, in Glasgow (Addicot 2016). The two trolls who menaced Criado-Perez over the £10 note were jailed. They had used 86 separate Twitter accounts with comments including 'Die you worthless piece of crap' and 'Go kill yourself' (Cockerell 2014) There were references to rape followed by 'I will find you (smiley face)'.

There are plans to tighten up the laws by prosecuting those who use fake online profiles to distribute 'grossly offensive' material (BBC 2016) and in 2017 a new national police hub to

crack down on those who commit online race hate was set up following criticisms that social media giants, Twitter and Facebook, were not doing enough to crack down on trolls (Roberts, 2017). But, in the main, journalists have been left to fend for themselves. For instance, shortly after troll attacks on BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg, deputy director Fran Unsworth said their female stars needed to learn to 'disassociate' themselves from online abuse (Foster 2016). Some organisations in the United States have begun to recognise the threat this poses. One interviewee in the PEN survey stated:

I think it would be helpful [for publications] to have contact with law enforcement. Some of that burden should be taken off the writer. Having law enforcement connections helps writers to be taken seriously. If a police report is coming from the editor in chief of an established institution rather than the freelancer who has been targeted, officers are more likely to take it seriously. Employers should be able to help answer a targeted writer's first, most basic question: Who do I turn to and where do I go? (Mandel 2018).

Just over 53 per cent of survey respondents reported alerting social media platforms to their harassment; of this group, 70.8 per cent said that the platform was not helpful. Just over 67 per cent wished that social media was more responsive and helpful to victims of online harassment (PEN 2018).

Research findings

Seasoned journalists

A quarter of the journalists interviewed had been affected by comments online and said it had made them more cautious about what they wrote. The proportion of freelance writers feeling pressured to tone down or avoid topics was higher at around 50 per cent. They felt employers wanted more controversial content to drive up readership, but felt uncomfortable about exposing themselves to more hate comments. One stated she was 'aware that if you don't get comments, the editor may think no-one read it'. A magazine freelance said nasty online comments had affected her ability to find case studies because they were often put off by the prospects of a 'backlash of abuse from online trolls'. Another said she had stopped submitting material to a national newspaper after receiving offensive comments. She also felt copy had been interfered with making it more controversial and 'just to drive up traffic' and 'devaluing journalism'

One freelance experienced hate speech directed at people with disabilities which meant she spent a lot of her unpaid time handling thousands of foul comments on social media. Another freelance journalist said: 'I've just pitched something to a national which is not at all controversial but am already worrying about the response it may generate.' Another freelance felt his story on the parallel nature of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism was 'ratcheted up slightly' to make it more sensational.

A national Sunday newspaper reporter said he was targeted and his Facebook page completely destroyed after he had infiltrated and exposed a Fascist party, National Action. Although angered, he said: 'That type of reaction is expected when exposing wrongdoing. If we gave in to threats and intimidation from people like that, they would continue to advance their cause unchecked which wouldn't do at all!' He continued: 'We're asked to make a story as good as we can and as controversial as possible and to drive the agenda for the next day. ... I'm sure that's a lot to do with driving traffic to online and social media.'

Another male journalist said he had been affected by abusive and threatening feedback after writing a piece about the political astuteness of Pussy Riot on his radio station's blog. He said he was 'attacked by a columnist in the women's online supplement' of trying to 'erase feminism' because he had dared to suggest that their political aims went a lot further than challenging macho politics. ... I got a lot of abuse (though have to say she did too), reacted with a clarifying counter blog, and it was fine in the end.' He felt there was a need for more guidance, stating:

There's so much hypocrisy going on the part of online newspapers. Of course the abuse is part of their business model because it creates clicks, which create advertising revenue. I'm not going to take any lessons or advice on online abuse knowing that is the case. This will only change if the advertising model changes when advertisers realise that having their ad next to a lot of bile doesn't do them any good and stop measuring attention in terms of mere clicks. But I'm not holding my breath.

A BBC news editor said it was regrettable that they had been forced to restrict their below-the-line comments as a main discussion area, due to the high cost of moderating sites after stories were being 'hijacked' by extremists, including fascists, homophobes and people with sexist

views. He said they had begun restricting them to two or three comments. 'When you spend too much of the licence fee money on external moderators weeding out extremist views then the ends don't justify the means,' he said.

The journalists interviewed were not aware of any specific support through their employers and just had to deal with attacks as and when they arose, with no preparation. They all felt there was a need for more advice, especially for newcomers to the industry.

New journalism graduates in media industries

Only three of the 20 journalism graduates now working in the media industries knew where to get information to help them. The few who did, referred to FAQs on blogging and social media sites. Only one said they had received training from an employer.

A recurring theme was that they felt lucky not to have been targeted, with only three of them saying they had been abused online, but they wanted the ammunition to handle themselves effectively in the event of an incident occurring. The three who had experienced attacks had then sought information on how to deal with it during and after the event. They also said the experience had affected what they wrote and their ability to freely express themselves online.

One of these incidents involved what they called a 'troll-fest', a coordinated attack from a group troll Facebook account. One incident involved a reader being upset about a comment. 'The blog editor decided to remove the section that had outraged the reader. Afterwards, I decided to dilute my opinions and observation so as to avoid such moments in the future.' Another said:

On a number of occasions my paper has been slagged off by a reporter on a competing newspaper publicly on Twitter. His aim was to embarrass his competitors. Sometimes the comments were verging on being defamatory. I always find it best not to get involved in that type of thing unless it is a genuine complaint where a correction, clarification or apology is necessary. I think it is best to stay away and avoid confrontation as everyone is entitled to their opinion and it says more about the commenter than you.

One said they now had to think 'very carefully about wording'.

Thirteen of the 20 in the sample said they would like more guidance. One journalist said this was especially needed when starting out:

'...more guidance would have been great with learning how to develop a thick skin and deal with difficult people.' Another, in PR, said: 'Not everyone has the confidence to know how to deal with negativity – especially online. People seem a lot more harsh/aggressive when hiding behind a computer screen.... People need to know how to react in a positive way and how to deal with situations.'

A journalist, who didn't feel he had much knowledge of support available, said: 'I think there should be guidelines to protect people ... it can come with the territory for people to vent their feelings, however unfairly at you. To know where to go if things go too far can only be a good thing.'

Another graduate, now a social media manager who had been a victim of trolling, said that, while 'generally sceptical of online guidance', a 'set of guidelines grounded in empirical research would be of use to social media managers and it would have been useful to me, especially in the crisis I have described'. Three graduates in the sample felt existing guidelines were adequate. One journalist championed people's right to say what they wanted online in the cause of free speech. Fourteen of the 16 graduates were comfortable at having an online profile for work purposes, whether required or not. The benefits were listed and summed up as:

Social networking sites are fantastic tools which allow you to engage your audience. Sometimes it can be a pain with people's comments not being very nice but the benefits of being able to use them as a tool to find stories, get comments and engage your audience far outweighs the negatives.

Another said: 'I think it is a good way of connecting with your readers. I do not always tweet content from work from my account but often have been tagged in items for work reasons. My employer does have a basic web policy that we follow, but I think as a journalist you should have a presence online.' A freelance graduate journalist stated: 'Having a profile representing your work is a way you can personally build a following. It makes the quality of your work better and when you move on to another career that following stays with you. People follow people, not brands in today's digital age.'

A graduate working at the BBC said: 'Social media is becoming such a massive part of what we do.' He said managing social media sites had

become a full-time shift 'so graduates need to know how to manage a large page on Facebook and the same on Twitter!' Some seem happy about the blurring of work and personal time. A graduate working in PR stated: 'I also used Twitter in my first job as an SEO link-builder to reach out to "mummy bloggers" to pitch to them to write articles on their website on behalf of *AO.com* where I worked. I found it was easier to do this through my personal account than from a brand account.'

Only two raised concerns. One felt it blurred the lines between their work and free time. Two graduates raised concerns about LinkedIn. One said she disliked having so much personal information on her page, which was needed for work and another said she had suffered sexist abuse.

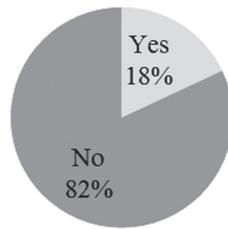
Most of the sample wanted more information on how to handle negative comments online.

Undergraduates

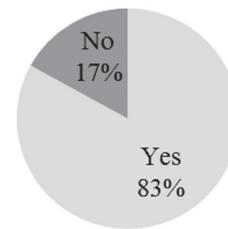
Thirty-six of the 40 undergraduates in the research sample had an online profile and five were also generating income through journalism work. Seventeen were uploading comment on a daily basis, nine weekly and the others less frequently. Six abusive incidents were recorded and four threatening comments. In nine cases the students had responded, stating that in one case it made it worse, in one case it made things better but interacting made no difference in the other cases. Seven students said the incident had affected what they wrote. Eight said they felt it had affected their ability to express themselves freely online. One female stated: 'I'm very opinionated when it comes to feminism and civil rights and I'm aware that this can cause backlash.' One male said: 'I felt less comfortable expressing my views for fear of rude comments.' Another student said: 'You just wonder if it is really worth dealing with narrow-minded/negative comments you'll receive and if you even have the energy to respond and explain to someone who wants to argue for the sake of arguing.' One male student admitted that it made him more aggressive: 'It causes debate in the comment thread, but does not affect what I will post in the future. Though likely causes me to post aggressive post to trigger more comment debates.' Another male student who 'earns as he learns' through sports freelance writing, attracted negative comment but didn't let it affect him.

Tweets had caused problems for one who said: 'Think twice about how statements like tweets can be misinterpreted.'

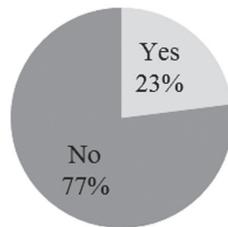
Affected what you write?



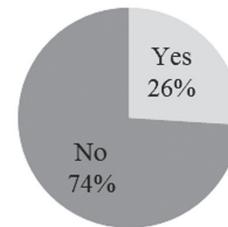
Want (more) info on how to deal with this issue?



Freedom affected by negative comments?



Know where to seek guidance online?



Undergraduate journalism students: Research findings

Only three of the students had complained about comments and in each case these had been made on Facebook and they contacted the social media complaints section. One case involved 'racially insensitive material/comment'. Of concern, almost 20 per cent said the fear of reprisals already affected what they wrote online and 23 per cent felt this affected freedom of speech.

Twenty-eight of the sample said they did not know where to seek guidance, 26 of them stating that they had never actually looked for any advice. The ten who said they did know where to get information mainly stated social media and website safety sections. They said they had found out through talks at school and university, 'common sense', from famous celebrities/journalists who had spoken out about it and through Google. Most students (83 per cent) said they wanted more information on how to deal with issues online. Comments included:

It would be good to know a balanced non-aggressive way to deal with it.

I am unsure of where I can look for guidance. It would be helpful to know how to defuse situations.

Many will feel silenced by online abuse.

Because the online presence in journalism is changing all the time so the guidance will need to be increased.

The last time I was told about where to find guidance online it was at secondary school so they mostly talked about children. Now I'm not a child I don't know where to go.

It is better getting an experienced answer from someone instead of dealing with it myself.

We should all feel confident at dealing with negativity and feel comfortable using social media.

Knowing how to deal with them (negative comments) can lessen the distress.

Preparing a support guide

Stage two of this research is preparing a guide, integrating suggestions made by graduates new to the media industries along with other advice obtained from this research. Graduate suggestions include:

Always remain professional/walk away from the desk if you feel like you are going to rant back at someone.

The best advice I could give is not to argue with people objecting to what you're posting, thank them for their contribution and leave it – a number of local papers I have seen do actually enter into justifying content when someone comments 'is this news' or 'what a c*** article'. And it is literally pouring petrol on the fire.

Try and rise above, unless it's in anyway abusive, of course.

When writing about football, always expect there to be unpopular opinion. The best way to deal with it is by explaining your argument.

Some people have an idea and they will stick to it no matter what. If after one or two replies to a more sensitive comment they keep on keeping on, just disengage. Some people want to argue, not listen to reason.

Conclusion

There is evidence that a significant number of reporters and journalism students are being affected by vindictive comments from internet trolls. At the same time it appears that employers are focused on business models that involve distributing market content across all platforms, often stoking up controversy to maximise traffic. The surveys, case studies and research findings make it clear that writers have to brazen themselves to face the potential aftermath of engaging in controversial topics. Furthermore there is a recognition that some seemingly inoffensive articles can still trigger vitriolic responses online. Although there is clear evidence that females attract the greatest venom from trolls, males in the sample were also subject to abuse.

Clearly there are some journalists who are able to ignore their critics, or in some cases engage in public spats, without it affecting their judgement. However, as the new pool of journalists are growing up in an environment that requires them to engage online, both at work and during their studies, there is a need to prevent budding writers from being stifled before their careers have begun. There is sensible self-reflection before publishing material and there is, also, the danger of self-censorship to avoid being hurt.

It would seem critical that for new generations of journalists to maintain the principles of freedom of the press, they need to feel confident about expressing themselves online and feel safe and secure in knowing how to handle criticism. An understanding of relevant laws, support mechanisms and appropriate ethical behaviour is essential to help young people preparing for work in the media industries navigate their way through these situations. It follows that existing journalists, and particularly those new to the industry, need support from employers to ensure those channels of communication become unpolluted and that free speech and the critical role of journalism within democratic societies is not compromised.

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