

# Part 1: The web we want, 2015



The web we want

## The dark side of Guardian comments

# How we defined abuse

- Dismissive trolling
- Whataboutery, off-topic, and other disruptive speech
- Author abuse
- Hate speech (not directed at the author)
- Threats to kill, rape or maim and doxxing

# Key findings

Some topics were more likely to attract abuse than others.

Fewer women than men write for the paper (c. 30% of all articles are by women overall – but the gender gap is bigger in ‘hard news’, business and other ‘serious’ sections).

Articles by women get significantly more blocked comments overall, regardless of the subject.

The more male-dominated the section, the more blocked comments women got ie not many women did write in World News, but those who did got more abuse than the men, and more than the women who worked in “softer” areas such as lifestyle.

# Intersectionality

- Although c. 70% of the Guardian's regular opinion writers were white men, we found that those who experienced the highest levels of abuse and dismissive trolling were not.
- The 10 regular writers who got the most abuse were eight women (four white and four non-white) and two black men.
- Two of the women and one of the men were gay.
- And of the eight women in the "top 10", one was Muslim and one Jewish.
- And the 10 regular writers who got the least abuse? All men.

# Staff survey

- 80% said they had experienced comments on the Guardian site or on social media which they felt “went beyond acceptable criticism of their work to become abusive.”
- On average more than 50 times.
- Abuse of women was often sexualized – much more likely than men to receive comments about their bodies, private lives or sexuality
- It had an impact – both on the wellbeing of staff, and on their work

# What's the harm?

Cumulative effect: Each comment / tweet is “a snowflake in an avalanche”

Psychological: journalists feel harassed, mobbed, bullied and sometimes afraid for their safety, or the safety of their families

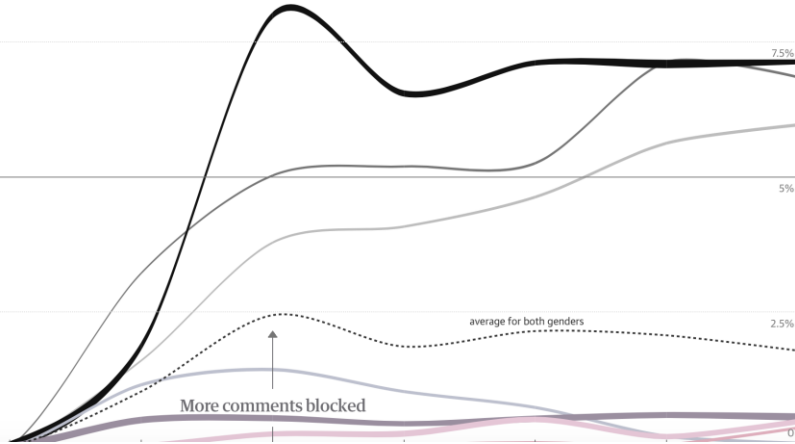
Professional: Women report leaving social media, or avoiding “hard news” areas. A quarter of women surveyed said they had refused assignments because of anticipated abuse.

Social harms – abuse has a chilling effect on journalism – working journalists report self-censorship, and it puts women and BAME people off joining the profession.

## 6 of 6

We also found that some subjects attracted more abusive or disruptive comments than others. Conversations about **crosswords**, **cricket**, **horse racing** and **jazz** were respectful; discussions about the **Israel/Palestine** conflict were not. Articles about **feminism** attracted very high levels of blocked comments. And so did **rape**.

10% of comments blocked



## What do we mean by 'abuse'?

'Imagine going to work every day and walking through a gauntlet of 100 people saying "You're stupid", "You're terrible", "You suck", "I can't believe you get paid for this". It's a terrible way to go to work'

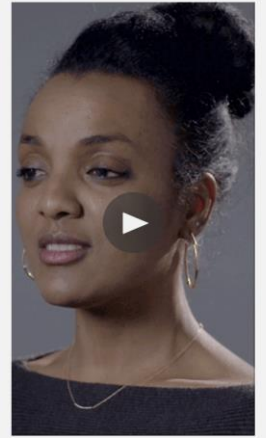
Jessica Valenti, Guardian writer



## How can we create the web we want?

'I think it is a worthy venture to keep comments open, even if you don't like what readers are saying or how they are saying it. Journalists need to be challenged'

Nesrine Malik, writer and commentator



Even five years ago, online abuse and harassment were dismissed as no big

**Which comment would you block?** Play the moderator role and take our quiz to see how your decisions compare to those of Guardian moderators

1 of 8 In an opinion piece about what makes one a "feminazi"

"Funny how so many journalists are female, and how many are feminists! A disproportionate number pollute journalism. Jusrt shows that men DO tend to do 'harder' jobs than keyboard bashing, while the technology that men designed and built is used to provide these harpies with a medium from which to spout their biased, sexist, hateful misandry."

Allow

Block

# Solutions: what the Guardian did

- Awareness-raising – engage audiences in conversation about the problem
- Strengthen community guidelines
- Open fewer articles to comments
- Build the strength of the moderation team (including better tech tools)
- Give gender-aware digital safety training to staff
- Set up clearer reporting structures so journalists know who to report abuse to
- Train managers in how to respond to reports of abuse
- Establishing peer support networks
- Recruit a more diverse newsroom

# However ...

- The law: few successful prosecutions, police and judiciary lack training, national laws but transnational platforms
- Social media platforms: notoriously unresponsive, and overwhelmed by user numbers
- Increase in state-sponsored and networked attacks
- Sexism, racism and hate in society more generally

# Part 2: Introducing IPI's 4-step protocol



## Measures for Newsrooms and Journalists to Address Online Harassment



**Protocol to support  
targeted journalists**



**Newsrooms  
structures and  
support mechanisms**



**Audience  
moderation**



**Actors  
involved**

# Online harassment is a workplace issue

- Newsrooms have a duty of care to their journalists, and to journalism
- The nature of the attacks is important, but so is the context
- Nothing is ever just virtual – an effective response will be cultural as well as technological
- IPI's four-step protocol can provide a basis for your own bespoke protocol





## 1. Reporting

Create a culture of safety around online abuse and establish clear channels to report it



## 2. Assessment

Evaluate the risk for the targeted journalist and media outlet

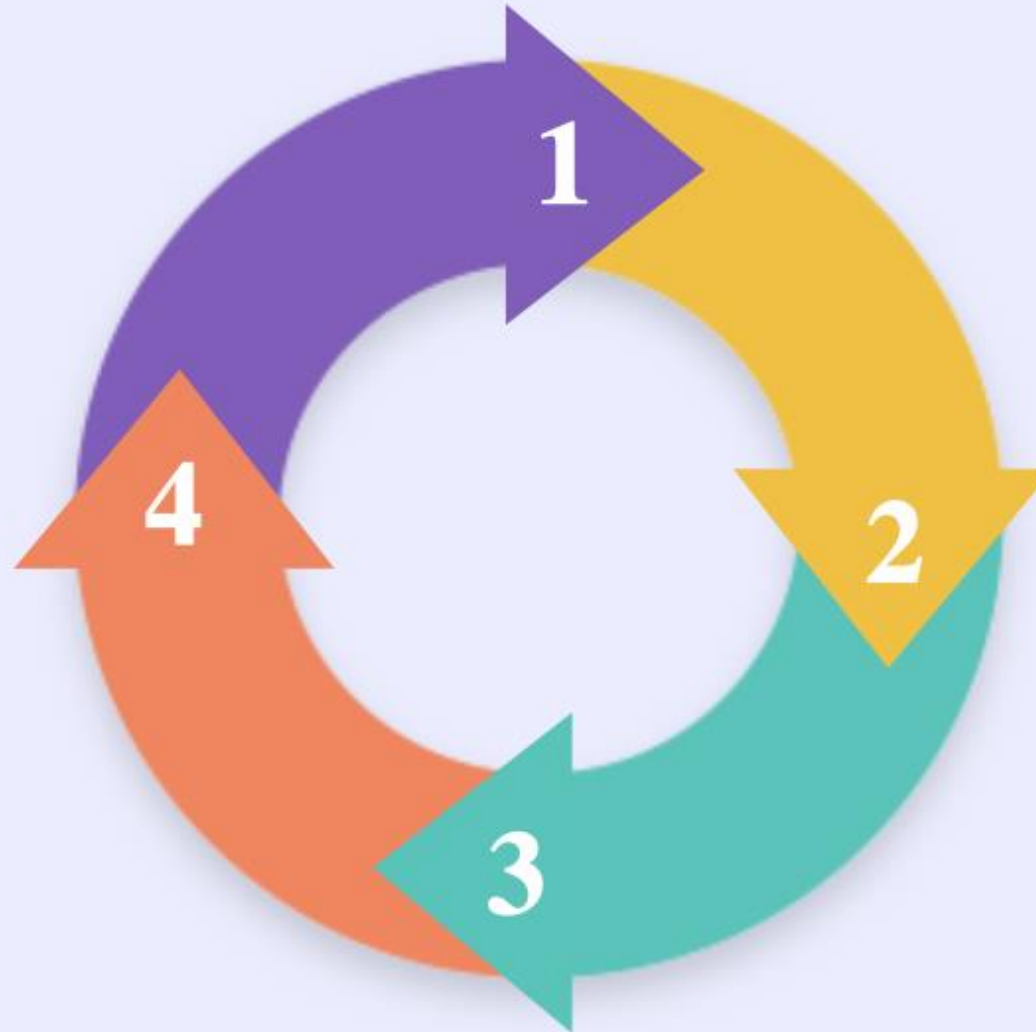


## 3. Support

Implement support and response measures to limit impact

## 4. Reassessment

Track the evolution of cases and the efficiency of support measures



# Before you begin ...

- Discover what your journalists are experiencing online, and the impact that is having
- Identify the steps your organisation has taken so far to counter this problem, and the people who are involved in this
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your current approach.

# Task 1: Survey your newsroom

- Survey your staff and regular freelancers, and have follow-up conversations.
- Surveys should be:  
Anonymous; Sent by editor-in-chief, stating the purpose of the survey (to improve the organisation's response)



# Task 2: The newsroom audit

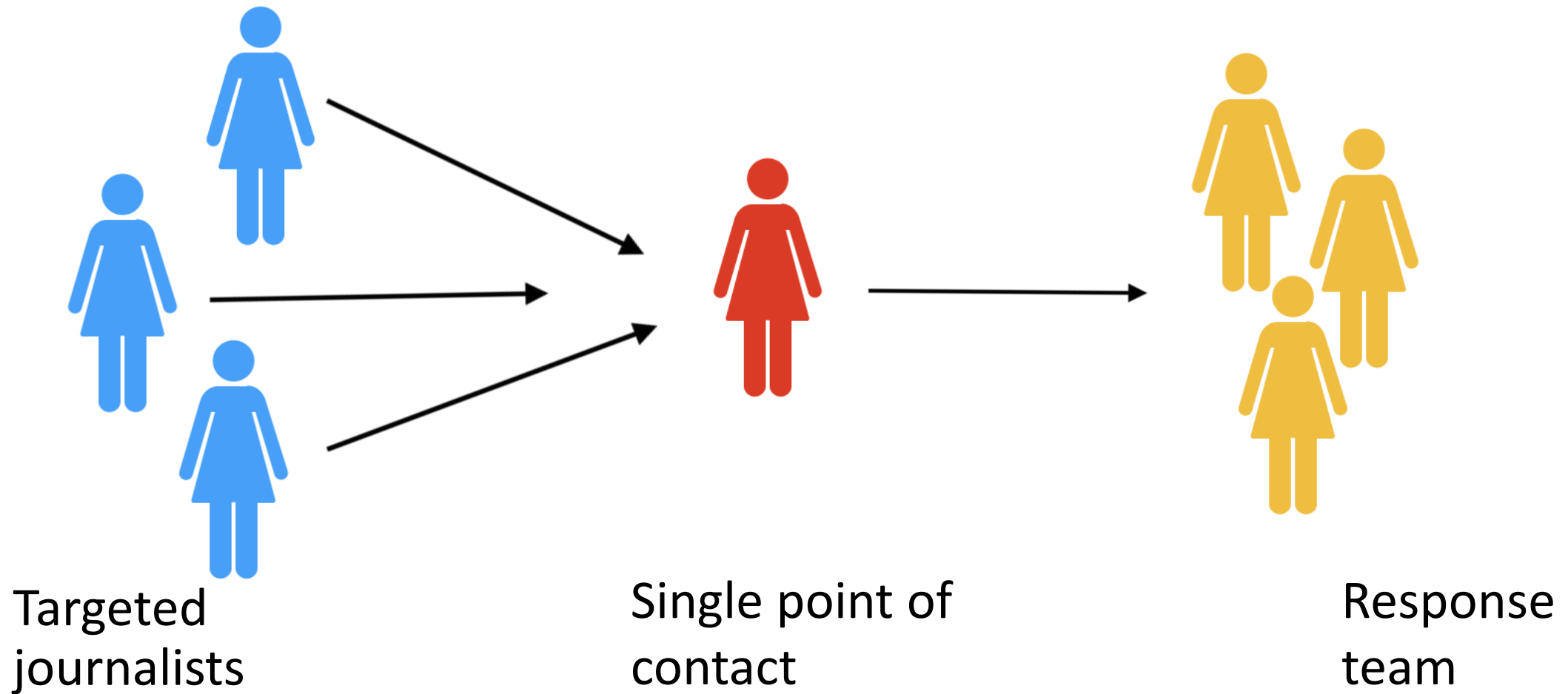
- Map your newsroom's response *as it is right now*
- You need to capture such things as your existing reporting systems, and training your journalists have already been given, any support mechanisms in place and so on – the worksheet will guide you
- You also need to think about who does what – are there gaps and/or bottlenecks?

Internal communications	Reporting systems
Informal support mechanisms	Formal support mechanisms
Risk assessment	Training
<b>Effective moderation</b> (Only applicable if your organisation enables on-site comments, or Facebook pages or other social media that can be moderated)	

# Now you are ready to design a protocol

- Step 1: Reporting
- Step 2: Risk assessment
- Step 3: Implementing support mechanisms
- Step 4: Tracking and reassessment

# Step 1: Reporting



# Who is in the response team?

- A senior member of the editorial staff – editorial expertise
- Legal expertise
- Digital expertise (digital safety officer)
- Employment responsibilities/ staff welfare (HR)

## Step 2: Risk assessment

- Two stages:  
Pre-publication, and in the event of an attack
- Gender aware
- Race aware
- Local context



# Pre-publication risk assessment

Who is involved?

- Editors
- Journalists
- Managing editors
- Social media / community team



# In the event of an attack

Assess risk to the individual and to the institution, including:

- The likelihood that an online threat could turn into a physical attack
- The damage caused to the reputation and credibility of the journalist and/or the news organization
- The emotional impact on the targeted journalist



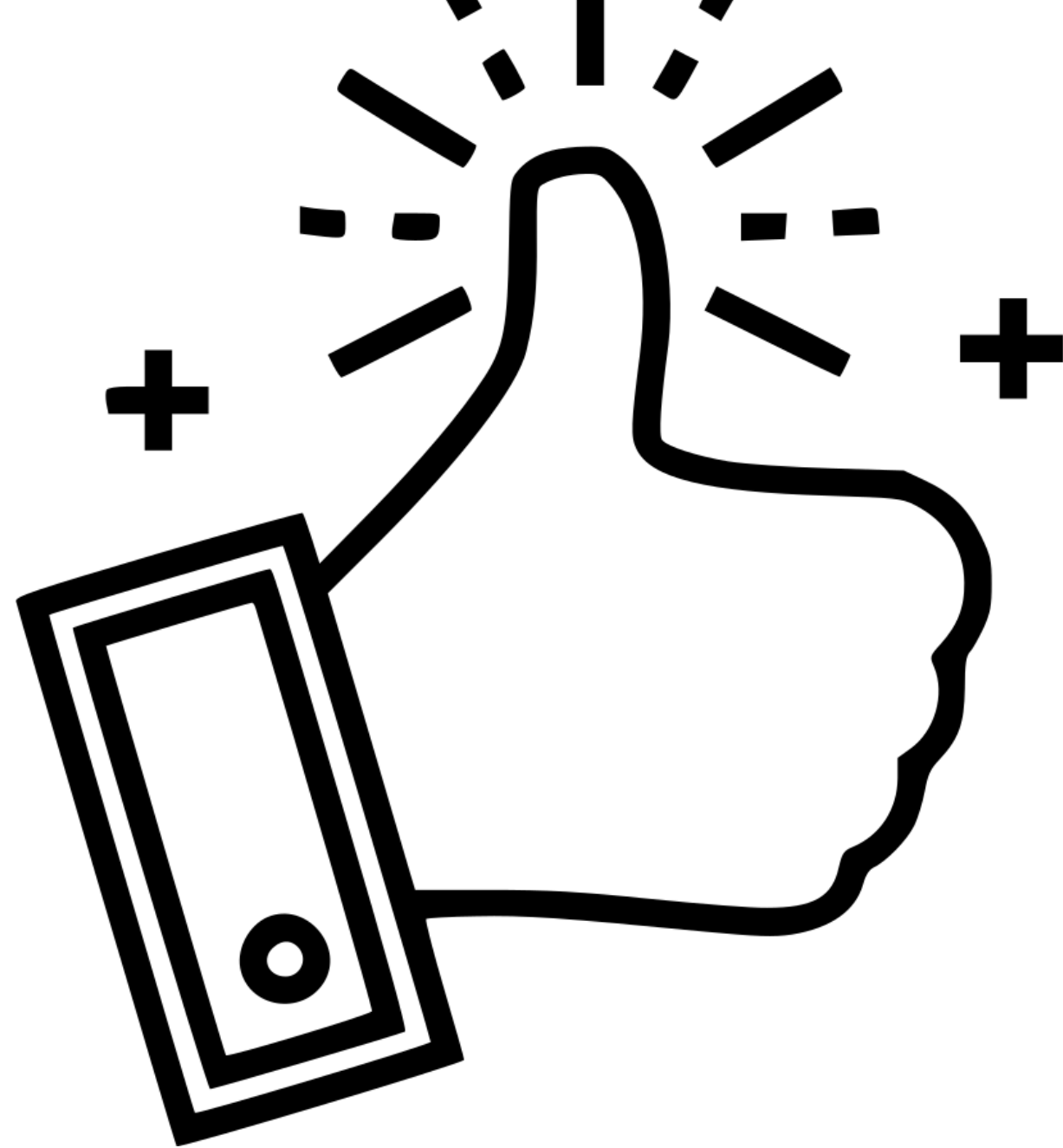
# Risk of physical harm

- If a single threat, who is the aggressor?
- If multiple threats in a coordinated campaign, how likely is it that others will feel legitimised to physically attack the journalist?; how recognisable is the journalist in public?; who is endorsing the campaign?



# Risk of reputational harm

- Is this taking place in an already polarized or hostile environment?
- How credible is the smear?
- What is the volume, reach and engagement?



# Risk of emotional harm

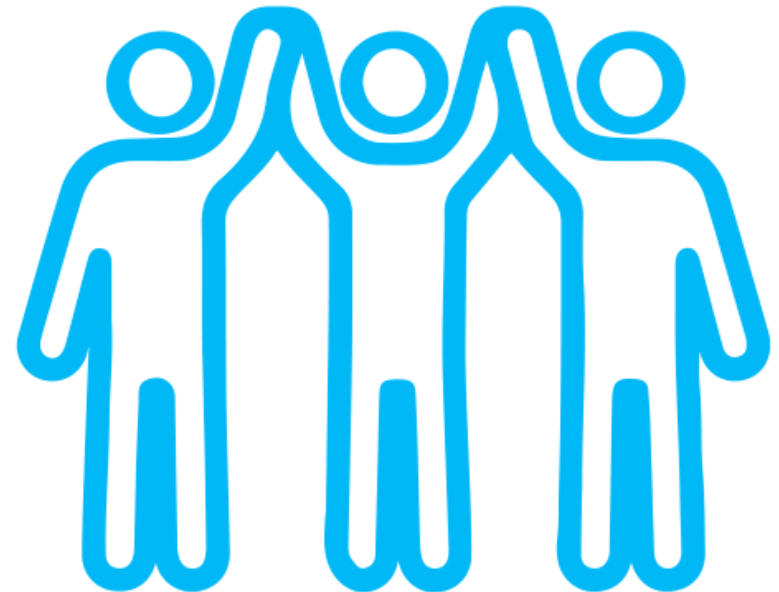
- Is the content discriminatory?
- Does it include traumatic imagery
- Does it include stalking?
- Does the journalist have a good support network?
- TRiM to assess psychological impact



## Step 3: Support mechanisms

NB Support mechanisms should be in place before attacks happen – they play a role in prevention as well as recovery

- Comments must be moderated, communities must be managed
- Offer digital security support (before and after an attack)
- Peer support – formal or informal
- Supportive employment practices
- Public statement of support
- Legal support
- Editorial support



# Comment moderation

- Delete / block attacks that fall outside the realms of legitimate criticism
- Establish community standards
- Never ask journalists to moderate comments on their own stories
- If the abusive comments appear off-site: Your response team should include someone who is familiar with social media platforms, so that action can be taken swiftly.
- You should also use any power you have to put pressure on SM companies to do more.

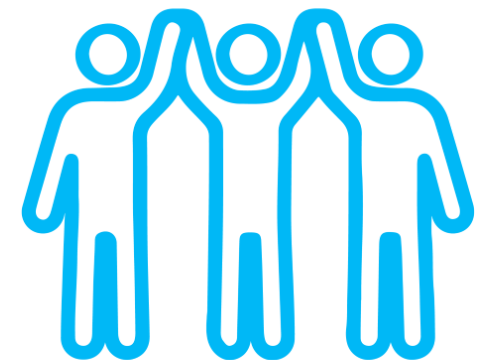


# Digital security

- Digital security training before attacks happen
  - protecting devices, communications and personal data
  - Gender- and race-aware / High-risk individuals
- Digital security measures in response to an attack:
  - The digital security team should double-check the target's electronic devices to identify potential vulnerabilities
  - Offer to monitor the target's social media accounts and email so that they can screenshot and report, and then delete, abusive content to minimise the targeted journalists exposure to it
  - Try to trace the perpetrator/s

# Peer support

- Formal mechanisms, such as mentoring schemes or a formalised peer support scheme.
- Informal mechanisms – tend to arise “organically”, and create a community of support. The effectiveness of informal support is greatly increased when all actors within the newsroom have received training on coping mechanisms for online harassment.



# Employment practices

- Offer reassignment/ relocation or temporary leave where appropriate.
- Always involve the journalist needs in the decision-making process.



# Public statement of support

- Decisions about whether to issue a public statement should be made by a team: management, editors, legal representative, head of audience, online safety expert *and the targeted journalist.*

In a now familiar move, Tucker Carlson opened his show last night by attacking a journalist. It was a calculated and cruel tactic, which he regularly deploys to unleash a wave of harassment and vitriol at his intended target.

Taylor Lorenz is a talented New York Times journalist doing timely and essential reporting. Journalists should be able to do their jobs without facing harassment.

# Legal support

- The law: Is it illegal according to your jurisdiction?
- The likelihood that bringing a case will deter future online aggressors.
- The likelihood that bringing a case will deter the actions of the aggressor.
- The possibility that pursuing legal action will encourage further attacks.
- The wishes of the targeted journalist



## 4. Tracking and reassessment

- It is important to properly document cases – essential if you end up taking legal action.
- It is important that the same individual or team responds to all reports, and follows up to see how effective their response was.
- Organisations can develop deep, contextual expertise that will strengthen their ability to assess risk and respond rapidly and effectively.

# Summary

IPI's four-step protocol: Reporting, Risk Assessment, Support, and Tracking

Operates at two levels: prevention and recovery.

You can't prevent all attacks, but you can minimise the harm they do.

# To prevent attacks ...

- Create a culture of safety in the newsroom
- Establish clear reporting lines
- Put together a team with the expertise needed to respond
- Consider likelihood of online attacks as part of risk assessment process
- Offer digital security training
- Foster a supportive community online, and moderate content effectively

# To recover from attacks ...

1. Identify the individual or team who will respond to reports of abuse, and make sure they have the training and expertise they need to offer support that is rapid, human and effective.
2. Give guidance / training on how to assess the risk of physical attack, reputational damage, and emotional impact
3. Put in place a range of support mechanisms that can be implemented as appropriate
4. Include a mechanism for tracking and reassessment of cases

Thank you!

<https://newsrooms-ontheline.ipi.media>