



# 'You really have to have a thick skin': A cross-cultural perspective on how online harassment influences female journalists

Journalism

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## Abstract

In-depth interviews with 75 female journalists who work or have worked in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America reveal that they face rampant online gendered harassment that influences how they do their jobs. Many

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of the women report that if they aim to engage with their audience online – which is a job requirement for many of them – they frequently face sexist comments that criticize, attack, marginalize, stereotype, or threaten them based on their gender or sexuality. Often, criticism of their work is framed as misogynistic attacks and, sometimes, even involves sexual violence. The journalists have developed a variety of strategies for dealing with the abuse, including limiting what they post online, changing what stories they report on, and using technological tools to prevent people from posting offensive words on the journalists' public social media pages. Results show that this harassment disrupts the routinized practice of reciprocal journalism because it limits how much these women can interact with the audience in mutually beneficial ways without being attacked or undermined sexually. While experiences of harassment were consistent across the countries studied, cultural differences were evident in how much the journalists were expected to engage online. Results are discussed in relation to the hierarchy of influences model that aims to explain how multiple forces influence media content.

**Keywords**

Civil society, gender, harassment, journalism (profession), online media

**Introduction**

It is certainly no secret that the Internet can be a dangerous place for women. Women YouTubers face a more hostile environment than men do (Wotanis and McMillan, 2014). Violent anti-feminist hashtags that reinforce traditional gendered norms and target women for attack erupt frequently on Twitter (Cole, 2015). Online bullying of women is rampant across platforms (Ging and Norman, 2016). Attacks on female gamers have earned their own name – #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Perreault and Vos, 2016). At the same time, female journalists have a long history of facing harassment on the job (Harp et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2016; North, 2016). As online commenting has been normalized as part of journalists' routines (Chen and Pain, 2017; Singer, 2005), the digital space has created a new sphere where women journalists might face harassment. Many journalists are expected to converse with the public through comments posted beneath news stories or through social media, but those conversations often turn acrid (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2014). For women journalists, this may foment a particularly potent combination: a digital sphere that invites harassment along with a requirement that they engage in this space as part of their jobs.

This study drew on in-depth qualitative interviews with 75 female professional journalists who work for or have worked for news outlets in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States to understand how women journalists navigate the digital sphere of online commenting and what influence harassment in that space has on their journalistic routines. We examined journalists from across three continents and from both the Eastern and Western world to provide a greater understanding of this topic. We drew on Shoemaker and Reese's (2013) theorizing on the routines of journalism to

interpret our data and understand the influence that attacks on female journalists have on the ‘broader deliberative arena to which journalism contributes’ (Reese, 2016: 31). We also examined our data through the lens of reciprocal journalism, which views journalists as community builders who can foment connections with their audience in a mutually pleasing fashion (Lewis et al., 2014).

## Literature review

### *Online commenting*

Users started posting comments on online news stories in 1998 (Santana, 2011), and commenting has since become standard at most news sites. Comments offer a way for the public to interact with other audience members and speak directly to journalists, creating a ‘shared space’ (Singer and Ashman, 2009: 3). Comments are similar to letters to the editor that newspapers have offered for decades, but they offer a more immediate and interactive way to link media organizations to their audiences (Bergström and Wadbring, 2015). However, incivility has been found to mar as many as 20 percent of online comments (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2014), raising concerns from journalists and the public (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011; Meltzer, 2015). Reading, responding to, or moderating online comments offers a fundamental shift in journalists’ news work that provides greater potential for engagement with the audience (Nielsen, 2012) but also increases journalists’ duties (Chen and Pain, 2017). Some journalists have resisted this shift, seeing engaging with the audience as outside the scope of their jobs (Loke, 2012; Santana, 2011). However, many embrace the task because they see its value or believe their employers expect it (Chen and Pain, 2017; Singer, 2005).

### *Gendered online harassment*

This study built on this literature by examining how female journalists deal with a particular aspect of online incivility – gendered harassment – in news story comments and social media. Gendered harassment is a form of incivility, defined as aversive speech that goes beyond mere impoliteness, and is marked by profanity, insults, and name-calling (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2014). Harassment is common online in part because of the *online disinhibition effect*, which posits that people may feel emboldened online – and, therefore, more likely to harass – because they feel anonymous or even invisible, as it is more difficult to link their actions to their identities (Fox et al., 2015; Spears et al., 2002; Suler, 2004). Gendered harassment is a specific type of harassment that includes sexist or misogynist comments that criticize, attack, marginalize, stereotype, or threaten a person based on attributes of gender or sexuality (Edström, 2016). It is a ‘special kind of sexualized and misogynist hate speech’ (Edström, 2016: 98–99) that differs from ordinary incivility against journalists.

Gendered online harassment includes both hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism is overtly misogynistic, negative comments about women (i.e. ‘Fat chicks cannot be 10s’), while benevolent sexism perpetuates stereotypical attitudes toward women (i.e. ‘Women shouldn’t have to work’). The key attribute of

gendered harassment is that it focuses on the gender and sexuality, not the person herself. For example, if a commenter called a journalist an ‘idiot’, that would fall under incivility in our definition, but not gendered harassment. In contrast, gendered harassment would include unwelcome sexual advances or barbs that attack a person for violating societal norms of how men or women should look or behave. It is important to note that anyone – not just women – can face gendered harassment. If a male journalist was called ‘effeminate’, for example, or a transgender reporter was called a ‘freak’, these would both fit our definition.

However, we focused specifically on the experience of female journalists because women are more frequent targets of online harassment than men (Wotanis and McMillan, 2014). Prior research has found that the Internet offers competing forces for women: it can both empower them by giving them a space to speak out that they do not have in the non-digital world (Lopez, 2009), but it can also constrain them as sexist gendered norms perpetuate online as they do offline (Fox et al., 2015). Women have a long history of being marginalized in the work place and in society more generally through a hegemonic power structure that values White men above other groups (Byerly, 2013; Milestone and Meyer, 2012). This history has been no different in journalism, where women were initially limited in journalistic jobs and had to fight for decades for equal status and pay with men (Byerly, 2013; Milestone and Meyer, 2012; Women’s Media Center, 2015). This equality has not been fully realized, and societal norms continue to work against women’s efforts to gain prominence or to free them from harassment on the job. Recent investigation in the mainstream media has documented that online harassment of female journalists is becoming a particular problem (e.g. Finneman and Yakabe, 2016; Macur, 2016). Yet, little published academic research documents the experiences of female journalists with gendered harassment, further highlighting the importance of this study.

### *Differing media systems and cultures*

To provide a broader understanding, we interviewed journalists from regions with very different histories, cultures, and media systems. In the Western countries studied, the news industry, particularly print media, has faced decline in the past decade from economic downturns and competition for advertising dollars with the Internet (Greenslade, 2016; Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016; Schnibben, 2013). In contrast, media outlets are rapidly growing in India and Taiwan (Lo, 2012; Vaidyanathan, 2011; Wang, 2004). Historically, men have dominated journalistic jobs in all the geographic areas we studied, although some progress in gender equity has been made over time. For example, in 2015, men held roughly two-thirds of the US journalistic jobs in broadcast, print, and wire services, while online journalism jobs were more evenly divided by gender at 58 percent male journalists (Women’s Media Center, 2015). Women are nearing numerical parity in journalism jobs with men in Western European countries, including in the United Kingdom with 45 percent women in the journalistic workforce (Thurman and Kunert, 2016) and in Germany with 40 percent female journalists (Hanitzsch et al., 2016). In Taiwan, women are not a minority in the news industry (Poindexter et al., 2008) but outnumber men as television reporters, a profession viewed as a *feminine job* where women use their appearance to woo an audience (Hu, 2003; Wang, 2015). Less progress

has been made in India, where women make up only 2.7 percent of India's mainstream journalists (Rao, 2008). Thus, this cross-cultural study offers a valuable explication of how women journalists are treated online while doing their jobs.

### *Journalistic routines*

The concept of journalistic routines stems from the hierarchy of influences model that aims to explain how multiple forces influence media content (Reese, 2007; Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). The model proposes levels of influence on content from individual factors, such as media workers' attitudes, to broader factors, including societal norms that shape human behavior (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). Between these two extremes, the model proposes that ritualized behavioral norms – called routines – influence how media content is produced. These routines exert an influence along with other factors, such as social institutions and hegemonic norms that perpetuate the status quo. We focused on the routines level of this model. Routines are generally unwritten rules of how journalists should behave, what they must do as part of their job, and how they go about doing that job. In a sense, routines both constrain and enable behavior (Reese, 2007; Shoemaker and Reese, 2013) for individual journalists subconsciously. Routines are just what seem normal to journalists as they go about their jobs.

As journalism changes in the light of new technologies, routines shift and new tasks become normalized. For example, using social media (Barnard, 2014; Lasorsa et al., 2012) and responding to or reading online comments (Chen and Pain, 2017; Singer, 2005) have been normalized into journalists' routines. Routines can be disrupted as new routines emerge. For example, in-depth interviews with 34 professional journalists showed that most had embraced a new routine of responding to comments on their stories, yet some saw this shift as challenging the journalistic norm of objectivity (Chen and Pain, 2017). Similarly, a content analysis of 22,000 tweets showed that as journalists adapt Twitter as part of their news work, they shifted the journalistic norm to remain impartial and nonpartisan and instead shared their opinions in more than 40 percent of tweets (Lasorsa et al., 2012). A textual analysis of 27,045 journalists' tweets also demonstrated changes in journalistic routines, showing greater acceptance of interactivity with the public (Barnard, 2014).

In this study, we examined how gendered online harassment may influence or even disrupt journalists' routines. Specifically, we were interested in examining how this harassment may influence reciprocal journalism, which encourages multiple forms of participation between the audience and journalists (Lewis et al., 2014). The concept suggests a two-way relationship between journalists and the public that may be direct or indirect. For example, a journalist may be reciprocal in an indirect way by repeating a hashtag on Twitter that audience members have used; a more direct path might be to retweet an audience member's message (Lewis et al., 2014). We posited that gendered harassment could thwart efforts at mutually beneficial reciprocity between journalists and the audience and, as a result, undermine this routine. Therefore, we posed,

*RQ1.* To what extent does the gendered online harassment women journalists face disrupt their journalistic routines?

**Table 1.** Description of the interview sample,  $N=75$ .

Race/ethnicity		Location of news organization		Media outlet	
Asian	36	The United States	28	Newspaper	31
White	28	Taiwan	20	TV/radio	23
Black	7	India	15	Web (only)	16
Hispanic/Latina	4	Germany	7	Magazine	5
		The United Kingdom	5		

*RQ2.* What strategies do women journalists employ to handle gendered online harassment as they do their jobs?

*RQ3.* Do the experiences of women journalists vary across cultures in regard to gendered online harassment?

## Method

We qualitatively analyzed data from in-depth interviews with 75 female journalists, according to an analysis strategy detailed below. As explained earlier, we sought only women journalists because prior research (Wotanis and McMillan, 2014) has shown that women are more likely than men to encounter online attacks. We sought a cross-section of journalists, exhibiting diversity of age, race, and country of origin to provide a fuller picture of the female journalistic experience online. We also sought journalists who worked at varied media outlets, including newspapers with websites, online-only publications, radio, and television (Table 1). Most of our sample was reporters because we sought journalists with direct experience reading comments as part of their jobs (Chen and Pain, 2017). Interviewees had been on the job from 9 months to 35 years. Subjects ranged in age from 21 years to 60 years (average: 34 years). All journalists from news organizations in Germany and the United Kingdom in our sample are White, and all the journalists from India and Taiwan are Asian. Race or ethnicity is noted only for the US sample, which had racial diversity.

We recruited subjects through social media and web searches, email lists, a labor union, and a public service broadcasting complaint office. Interviews were conducted from spring 2016 through autumn 2017 by phone or in person and were recorded. Each lasted 15–47 minutes. We also took notes during interviews and transcribed some recordings. Interviews with the journalists in Taiwan were conducted in Mandarin by a Mandarin-speaking researcher and translated by her into English. Interviews with journalists from German news outlets were conducted in German and analyzed by the German project team. All other interviews were conducted in English. In the interest of privacy, the women's names and news organizations are withheld. Researchers posed a series of open-ended questions to interview subjects, asking about typical routines regarding reading and responding to online comments on their news organizations' websites and social media pages. They were specifically asked whether they have strategies to deal with harassment or incivility from the public.

## Analysis strategy

To analyze our data, we employed McCracken's (1988) long interview technique, which allows researchers to become like anthropologists by immersing themselves in the subjects' cultural and social norms to make meaning from their statements. We listened to our recordings and read notes and transcriptions from interviews several times. Based on these initial analyses, we coded our data first into broad categories by grouping together interrelated ideas (Cresswell, 1994). Then, we reviewed our transcripts and notes again and narrowed those categories to specific themes that were most prominent and produced 'deeper and more critical interpretations' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 207). Our goal was to understand how commenting influences female journalists' routines by making sense of their words, using an interpretivist paradigm (Brechtin and Sidell, 2000). In this approach, we looked for commonalities in our data to form categories (Cresswell, 1994), as well as specific facts about how the women handle comments. We examined both manifest and latent meaning in their words (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) to gain meaning and understanding as well as illuminate strategies that women journalists use in dealing with comments. Finally, we interpreted these data using theory as a guiding principle.

## Results

Three main themes surfaced in our data: 'We have become an uncivilized society', which discussed abuse and delegitimizing strategies that come with it; strategies for dealing with harassment, which offered women's tips for doing their jobs despite harassment; and cultural differences, which examined how experiences of female journalists differ geographically.

### *'We have become an uncivilized society'*

Our first theme answered RQ1, which asked about the influence of online harassment on journalistic routines (Table 2). In total, 73 of the journalists in our sample reported some form of online harassment, but it was often most pronounced and frequent among the 23 television journalists. Younger journalists reported personal harassment, as did more seasoned ones. Journalists noted that criticism of their work was often framed as misogynistic attacks or involved sexual violence, and this differed from affronts on male reporters. A 32-year-old television anchorwoman in Taiwan said male journalists might be told to 'go to hell' for a story they reported, but for her, attacks would be more objectifying: 'Why don't you be a pornography actress?'. A British digital editor shared a similar experience: 'I have been accused of having a feminist agenda, which wouldn't really happen to a guy'. A German journalist spoke of threats, which she reported to police. An Indian journalist noted that she gets obscene pictures tweeted at her on Twitter when people do not like her reporting. 'My men colleagues get trolled, but they don't often get pictures of breasts or penises like we do', she said. A White American online reporter with 29 years of experience explained,

**Table 2.** Overview of ‘We have become an uncivilized society’ theme.

Personal attacks were aimed at delegitimizing female journalists’ value, not merely criticizing their work. This theme reflects data from 73 women in our sample

Country	Examples of theme	Participant
India	‘I did this story on women being molested .... I was trolled and so many comments said that I should go the same way as the other women went. That I should be raped and thrown to the dogs’	Newspaper reporter
Germany	‘The feedback [on this article] was not criticism, it was threats, it was death threats, it was calls for rape. It was not criticism of my work; it was actually the destruction of my person’	Online editor
The United Kingdom	‘Now and then I’ll get comments thrown at me, purely just about my hair color. I will get comments about being blonde and not being intelligent enough because of my hair’	Video producer
The United States	‘Sometimes it’s so insidious that you can’t respond at all. For example [what] do you say to someone who is calling you “cunt” with a profile picture of a cucumber?’	African-American television reporter
Taiwan	‘I was mocked not only because I am a female but because people like to watch a graceful and beautiful anchorwoman made an embarrassing mistake’	Television reporter

Women have to deal with the sexual comments that males never have to deal with .... You’re viewed more often as a sexual object .... I’ve been told I need to get laid .... They’re rare, but they’re so much worse than what my male colleagues have to deal with.

This suggested that gendered harassment of women journalists puts them in a double bind (Jamieson, 1995). If they excel at their jobs, they are seen as getting special favors because of their gender or sexuality. If they fail, their mistakes are viewed as an indictment of women in general. This also suggested a disruption of the normalized news work of reciprocal journalism (Lewis et al., 2014) because women journalists cannot participate with the audience in mutually beneficial ways if they are being attacked or undermined sexually.

Journalists in our sample reported they faced particular harassment if they wrote about topics associated with men, such as automobiles. A 40-year-old reporter from the United Kingdom found that online commenters rallied against her when she published a story about a female gamer for focusing on a woman in a male-dominated genre. The fact that gendered harassment happened particularly when women journalists crossed the invisible line between what men are supposed to do and what women are supposed to do (Byerly, 2013; Milestone and Meyer, 2012) further illustrated how societal norms influence how women journalists do their jobs. In this case, the routine of journalism – to cover a newsworthy topic like automobiles or video gaming – clashed with the societal norm of gendered roles, and women were put at a disadvantage in their jobs. A White investigative journalist in the United States with 20 years of experience said she wrote an exposé for her online-only publication about local justice clerks who were



deleting tickets that their friends and relatives had received. Instead of merely criticizing the story or her reporting, attacks focused on how she looks and how she does her hair. She elaborated,

This is my theory ... I think that at one time in our society it was very clear what our public and private personas are. We had them, and they were very separate .... The Internet and social media have blurred those lines. There isn't a public and private persona anymore. We have become an uncivilized society .... It hurts.

Again, this powerfully suggested that this gendered harassment of women journalists undercuts their ability to conform to journalistic routines. Investigative reporting is a basic tenet of the field, yet when a woman did it, she received pushback that focused on how she looks, not how she told a story.

Other story topics – such as politics, feminism, immigration, or race – also were more likely to turn female journalists into targets, according to our sample. A 48-year-old Black journalist from the United States reported that she was vilified online when she covered the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights abuse of African-Americans at the hands of police. ‘The F bomb was hurled at me in a way that I have never experienced before. It was a frenzy. Such vitriol and hate’, she said. Violent misogynistic comments do not only lead to disrupted relationships between journalists and their audiences; they also aim to mute the female journalists’ ‘voice in the public discourse’, one German interviewee stated. A similar strategy was humiliation. A British video producer said she encountered intense harassment – peppered with gendered references – while working in Australia, doing a story about Halal certification, a process that ensures food has been prepared in accordance with Islamic law. She explained,

I had a lot of Australians who did not agree with Halal making comments towards me, making comments saying ‘I’m throwing my country underneath the bus’. They made some really horrible, racist comments that I should go join ISIS. I even received comments about the color of my hair being blonde, so how can I be intelligent in any sort of way?

A German journalist noted that attacks were particularly intense during a large wave of refugee resettlement in 2015. Similarly, a Latina who writes for an American newspaper, reported that any political story generated harassment, but one of the worst was an article she wrote about a rape victim who spoke out against US President Donald Trump. The reporter said she was subjected to extremely misogynistic comments and called a ‘needy Hispanic’ by a commenter. An African-American newspaper journalist with 30 years’ experience said she was violently assailed when she wrote an opinion piece about Trump from the perspective of a Muslim woman. She noted,

I was shocked by the dehumanization and demonization that exploded on Twitter and Facebook as well as direct email to the point to where I thought I should get security cameras. I was called an idiot more than I have ever been called in my life .... But several hundred uncivil messages for being a Muslim feminist?

These experiences highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender in online harassment, much as it this interconnects in the offline world (Crenshaw, 1991; Daniels, 2009).

Journalists we interviewed reported being told either they are too fat and ugly to be on television or they are so beautiful that audience members flooded them with unwanted attention. They felt this marginalized their professional value, as the audience viewed them only as sex objects. ‘Viewers care about appearances of female TV reporters more than their professional ability’, a 30-year-old reporter in Taiwan said. A White television reporter in the United States noted she felt men often thought they were doing something positive when they told her ‘beauty is your best quality’, not realizing, perhaps, that it undermined her professional value. Some reporters said they felt they received few responses on Facebook when they shared serious news stories they had reported, but interest swelled if they included pictures of themselves. A 32-year-old anchorwoman from Taiwan elaborated,

Most of my followers on Facebook are male. They don’t really care about the news I share. They follow me because they want to see beautiful girls. They care much about my make-up, the length of my skirts, and my clothing. The goal of my Facebook page is to attract attention; therefore, I post what viewers like to see.

### *Strategies for dealing with harassment*

Of the journalists in our sample, 24 reported specific strategies for dealing with the unwelcome comments and harassment, answering RQ2, which asked about how women handle the abuse (Table 3). The rest of the women in our sample still wrestled with the issue but had not changed their work routines to deal with it. A White American television journalist with 13 years of experience was typical of the women who had come up with specific strategies for dealing with abuse. She said she gets misogynistic comments daily on her professional Facebook page, so she uses technological tools to prevent certain words from appearing on her wall unless she approves them. She explained, ‘I have moderation on my page for the words “sexy,” “hot,” or “boobs,” and it automatically blocks the comment right away. It’s terrible that I have to do that’. Another White American TV journalist employed a similar approach. ‘If someone writes, “You are a gorgeous goddess,” that’s a comment I would probably delete because it could get out of control’, explained the reporter with six years’ experience.

Other journalists simply ignored online harassment for fear, a response would incite more reaction, or they shifted how they told a story to head off harassment. A 26-year-old online reporter in Taiwan said she wrote about a celebrity and faced harassment from the person’s fans who flooded her Facebook wall and inbox with nasty comments. As a result, she focused on positive news: ‘If I cover news that pisses celebrities and fans off, I would be severely bullied online. I get a lot of traffic and bonuses if I cover stories that please everyone. It’s a win-win strategy. Why not?’. This suggested that journalists are very cognizant of how gendered online harassment – or the mere threat of it – challenges journalistic routines (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). They appeared to be trying to strike an uneasy balance between what they see as their journalistic jobs while protecting themselves from abuse. Other journalists asserted that they do not let the fear of harassment change how they do their jobs, showing the entrenchment of journalistic routines. ‘As a professional news worker, I am not influenced by someone unprofessional’, explained a TV reporter in Taiwan.

**Table 3.** Overview of strategies for dealing with harassment theme.

Some female journalists have shifted their work routines to help prevent harassment or to dedicate time and energy to dealing with it. This theme reflects data from 24 women in our sample

Country	Examples of theme	Participant
India	'All this trolling takes [its] toll ... you know ... much more than is obvious. I am suddenly so careful about what I post online even on personal accounts. It's like I am watching over my shoulder in cyberspace, making sure everything is shared only between trusted networks'	Online reporter
Germany	'I read out loud the worst comments in front of a camera. ... I was visible for the commentators, by reacting to them on the video. I just read the comments without adding my own comments. Simply to make the public realize what absurd comments people write and how these are below the belt, so that everybody can hear ...'	Freelance columnist
The United Kingdom	'I just ignore it, or I block the person if they're sending repeated messages. I think [in] most cases, I've always ignored it. I just don't want to egg them on. Ultimately that's what they want'	Video producer
The United States	'I never respond to comments. I feel it won't serve a purpose. But I am aware of how trolling happens on social media .... Yes, it affects the way I do my stories .... I certainly have added in folks' comments or made sure every side was represented'	White TV/web reporter
Taiwan	'I jump into the conversation because I was too angry; I just cannot handle my anger'	Online reporter

In contrast, a Latina said she has faced extreme misogyny and harassment online since she became a newspaper reporter in the United States nearly 5 years ago, but it has made her extra vigilant about accuracy. 'I don't feel scared', she explained. 'I think misogyny online has actually made me a more objective journalist. It has made me careful to include all voices'. A 22-year-old Black TV journalist in the United States said fear of harassment has not led her to drop a story, but she is extra careful to avoid details that might upset people. 'Yes, its affects the way I do my stories. I am more careful', she said.

Several journalists reported that online harassment has forced them to emotionally gird themselves, adding another layer to the journalistic routines. They have to think of their public persona differently than their personal one, and try – often without success – not to let the harsh words sting. 'You really do have to build a wall. You really have to have a thick skin. You have to learn ... even though they make it personal, that it's not personal', explained a White American journalist with 20 years' experience. The journalists conceded that dealing with abuse is challenging. 'Almost everyone will say, "Don't take it personally," but when you read 40 comments that say women shouldn't work. ... You do take it personally', noted a White US TV journalist with 3 years' experience. The barrage of harassment also means some journalists protect their professional pages from

their families. A White American TV journalist with 6 years' experience said the vitriol on her social media pages is often so objectifying that her husband will not view the pages. 'He doesn't want to see it or go there. But I have to', she said. A freelance reporter from the United Kingdom noted that she censors what she says online to prevent attacks because they are so emotionally damaging. She has found it difficult to deal with, and it distracts her from her work. She elaborated,

What I find is, say if I write for the Sunday newspaper, those comments will appear on my Twitter feed on Sunday and, in the few instances where I've been abused, it's thrown my whole weekend. I want Sunday to be relatively peaceful. I just don't engage.

All seven German-speaking interviewees underlined the importance of colleagues to talk about their situations and back them up, for example, by moderating comments for them. But in our general sample, several journalists bemoaned the lack of newsroom training to help women handle the abuse or circumvent it. They said they felt as if they were on their own – with little support from managers – on how to curb the abuse that comes with their jobs. An Indian journalist, for example, said she received 100 comments that read, 'fuck, you, bitch', on a story she wrote. No one in her news organization's information technology department seemed to have the will to stop it. What helped the German-speaking interviewees was either if they went public with their stories or if prominent female TV journalists started public conversations about these attacks. The public discourse about the 'uncivilized parts of the society' was necessary, and even if they were not necessarily part of this public conversation, the journalists were grateful that others were.

### *Cultural differences*

While many of the experiences of online harassment were similar across the geographic areas we studied, our data also showed stark differences related to variations in journalistic routines and audience expectations, answering our final research question, which asked about cultural differences (Table 4). This theme was reflected in the interviews of all 75 of our respondents. A strong cultural norm influenced how women navigated the digital space and how they were treated online. The 20 journalists in Taiwan felt limited in their online discourse by a cultural norm that sharing their own stories on Facebook or Twitter was bragging, while most UK and US journalists felt they were expected to engage. However, the pressure to engage online was less among the seven German-speaking journalists. US journalists reported having multiple social media pages and feeling that while engaging with the audience was a shift in traditional journalistic routines, it was vital in today's highly competitive drive for page views. Managing these accounts is a 'big part of my day', explained a 28-year-old White TV reporter in the United States. But a 32-year-old newspaper reporter in Taiwan was reluctant to share too much online: 'I feel shy to share my news. I don't want to be considered a showboat. I share my news only when I need traffic. Then I share my news and beg my Facebook friends to click my news'. For the 15 Indian journalists, expectations to engage online were high, yet they felt almost no support from their news organizations when abused.

Upper-level managers seemed unfamiliar with the pitfalls of online discourse and left it to the women to deal with the problem. ‘They expect social media to be a positive magical influence where people who think critically are just waiting to take action to change the world’, said one Indian journalist.

In summary, our data strongly suggested that the gendered harassment that flourishes on online platforms also was frequent as female journalists attempt to engage in the emerging journalistic routine of reciprocity. Women journalists, for the most part, were expected as part of their jobs to engage with the public in a way that helps both the journalist and the audience (Lewis et al., 2014). Yet, when female journalists did this, they often encountered hateful comments, attacks about how they look, or challenges to their value as journalists because they are women. This disrupted their ability to fulfill this new routine of engaging and responding to comments. It also thwarted their ability to perform more traditional journalistic routines, such as investigative reporting or covering a topic associated with men, such as cars. Overall, our data suggested that when women journalists engaged online they faced the same type of threat of harassment as they have for decades in the offline world (Harp et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2016; North, 2016), but it was more pervasive because of the immediacy of the digital world.

## Discussion

This study drew on rich data from in-depth interviews with 75 female professional journalists who currently work or have worked at news outlets in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States to examine their experiences with gendered online harassment. Our findings suggested strongly that gendered online harassment was a frequent issue. Television reporters reported more incidences of harassment, which seems logical, as they were more likely to be pictured than print reporters. People who see TV journalists on newscasts or in videos on a station’s website may feel a sense of parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956) with the journalists that fosters an artificial closeness. They may have felt more open to questioning these women’s physical attributes or asking them out than they would with a print or website journalist. Online gendered harassment appeared to be the way that the audience deals with women journalists, suggesting that misogynistic remarks, inappropriate requests, and sexist stereotypes are just part of the job today.

In terms of journalistic routines, these findings showed strongly that women journalists are caught in a classic double bind (Jamieson, 1995). Not only reporting on specific topics but also engaging in the emerging routine of journalistic reciprocity (Lewis et al., 2014) puts women journalists in a situation where they risk harassment and threats. They saw it as an important part of their jobs to engage, but when they did it, they knew they would get even more unwelcome and hurtful responses. Therefore, clearly the prevalence of gendered harassment online disrupted journalistic routines and stole their ‘easiness’ while working. In some ways, this differed little from the general incivility that all journalists may face through online comments. In fact, while we focused specifically on gendered harassment, for many of our subjects, all incivility felt like gendered attacks. As a White reporter at a web-only publication in the United States explained, ‘This job

**Table 4.** Overview of cultural differences theme.

Journalists felt varying degrees of pressure to engage online, depending on the journalistic culture in which they worked. This theme reflects data from all 75 women in our sample

Country	Examples of theme	Participant
India	'We are encouraged to go online to promote our stories on Twitter and Facebook, but there is little training given to us. We aren't taught about how we can stay safe online ... how to interact with comments online ... how to deal with trolls .... Organizations expect us to use online resources for promotions but won't take any responsibility for any backlash we may face'	Online reporter
Germany	'While attending a journalism school, everybody keeps telling you: "Search for your niche! Personalization! Stand for something!" ... But this can be both a blessing and a curse. If you stand for something, you become visible and present. You learn at school how to make yourself present, but not how to make yourself invisible if desired or necessary, or how to protect yourself'	Magazine journalist
The United Kingdom	Online harassment is 'not really frequently discussed [in the newsroom]. It's all kind of expected now and then .... We only really discuss it if it's in a big scale or we're not really prepared for it'	Video producer
The United States	'I look at all comments positively. Even the negative ones. They all start a conversation, and that's what my job as a journalist is. I am here to make people think. Even if the comment is very vitriolic, it's evoked a reaction and that's good enough for me. But that doesn't mean I will engage with negative commentators. I read my comments but that's all'	African-American online reporter
Taiwan	'As a reporter, there is no need for me to build my [online] brand. Building [a] brand is something that anchorwomen should do but they build their brands with their pretty pictures not their news'	Television reporter

is so difficult and so emotional. I think social media and the Internet really adds to that ... I think even if you have a thick skin, it wears on you'.

It is also notable that journalists across our sample shared many similar experiences, despite different cultures and media systems. Consistently, the journalists we interviewed saw online gendered harassment as hampering their efforts to report the news, engage with the communities they cover, or have a voice in the digital sphere. An Indian online editor explained,

Sex is used to intimidate us. Rape is used to frighten, intimidate, and stop us ... from doing our work, but at a deeper level it is actually about stopping us from having opinions, showing any semblance of independence.

## *Implications of online gendered harassment*

Our research demonstrated quite strongly that journalism schools and media outlets must pay more attention to this issue because the women in our sample overwhelmingly wanted more training to handle harassment and for their news organizations to protect them from abuse. To answer their request, student journalists should be trained how to handle the online harassment that comes with the job. They should be taught how to deflect what they may face online, so it does not hamper their ability to engage online. Similarly, journalists should get training and support as they encounter the online space. To answer this clear call from women in our sample, newsroom managers and editors must provide scripts for journalists to use to deter harassment and be ready to step in quickly if things escalate. Journalists must have the ability to report harassment to upper management confident that they will be heard and action will be taken because women in our sample reported not feeling that freedom. Many women in our sample pointed to the need for more stringent comment moderation, so we suggest comment moderators must take an active role, not merely deleting offensive comments but also asking commenters to civilize their tone and explaining to them why a particular comment was removed. This should help foster a norm of more civility. However, women in our sample stressed that what is most important is that newsrooms change the culture that allows this abuse to continue. If media outlets are going to have their employees engage online, they must see it as part of their responsibility to prepare these employees and ensure their safety, including supporting them in taking legal action against violators if necessary. No journalist should ever feel as this online reporter in India felt: ‘My organization pussyfoots around this. They don’t see that I am trolled so personally that it hurts’.

## *Limitations and future research*

While in-depth qualitative interviews provide rich data, this approach relied on a small sample that is not representative. Our goal was to find meaning through the female journalists’ words, not make generalizable inferences. Future research should follow up with a quantitative survey to understand more fully the extent and effect of online gendered harassment on journalistic routines. Also, this study focused on journalists who currently work or have worked in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, but greater understanding could be gained through expanding to other countries. In addition, we focused mainly on reporters because prior research has shown they are at the front lines of dealing with online commenters (Chen and Pain, 2017). However, future research should examine newsroom managers, such as editors, to assess whether they are cognizant of the gendered harassment their female employees face when they are required to interact online.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, social media managers and content moderators should be probed about how they do their jobs and what criteria they use in making decisions about what to do with an offensive comment.

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