

7. MEDIA INDUSTRIES AND PRODUCING MEDIA CONTENT

7.1: “NEVER ABOUT MY WORK, NEVER ABOUT MY MOTIVATIONS”: EXPLORING ONLINE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS OF COLOR

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The authors interviewed female journalists of color to understand their experiences with incivility in readers' responses to their articles.

The female journalist—a Black television/web reporter with 18 months' experience—braces for the onslaught of nasty comments when she does a story on a hot-button topic. “I really don't respond because I believe that it won't change anything,” she explains. “I get abused mostly online where people leave really nasty comments on certain stories, like those with political overtones, especially immigration.”

This journalist is hardly alone. Journalism has turned into a two-way street where engaging with audiences online via comments on news sites and on social media is the norm (Santana & Russial, 2013). This reciprocity between the journalists and the audience (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014) can make the internet a truly democratic and shared space, opening areas for rich citizen–professional collaborations (Reese, 2016) and creating direct links between media organizations and the audiences whose information needs they serve.

But the interactive digital space also offers a darker side. Online comments on news stories are rife with vitriol. Recent research shows that as many as one in five online comments are uncivil

(Chen, 2017). Journalists are particular targets for these attacks (Chen & Pain, 2017), and women journalists face the additional challenge of gendered harassment (Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer, & Troger, 2018). Gendered harassment is a “special kind of sexualized and misogynist hate speech” (Edström, 2016, pp. 98–99) that targets women for attack based on their gender or sexuality. Interviews with female journalists from across the world (Chen et al., 2018), for example, found that women aren't just criticized for their stories or attacked verbally as male reporters are—they are called “bitches” and threatened with rape.

In this reading, we explore the specific experiences of women journalists of color as they navigate the digital space. Women journalists of color are at greater risk of attacks because the online space—like the offline world—is shaped by societal norms that value White males over others. Critical race theory explains this by asserting that racism is not an anomaly in our culture, but rather a means of reinforcing the power of the dominant group, White men (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). The media—through news stories and even online comments—reinforce these viewpoints, creating an inaccurate view of race (Campbell, 1995). People of color in general are portrayed as other to the dominant White society (Liebler, 2010), decreasing their value in what is called inferential racism (Hall, 1992). This marginalization is amplified for women of color because they experience two intersecting categories—race and gender—by which they are the other (Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, the anonymous nature of the internet encourages people to say things they perhaps wouldn't say offline (Li, 2008), such as racist or hateful comments.

To understand their experiences, we interviewed 20 American female journalists of color. Our participants' ages varied from 22 to 45 years, and their professional experiences (television, online, and print) ranged from 2 to 30 years. All names and news organizations are withheld to protect the women's privacy. Interviews lasted about 30 minutes. We asked open-ended questions about the kind of online comments their articles elicited, how audiences engaged with them on social media, and how they dealt with incivility. We also asked whether their organizations had training programs or other help for women journalists, especially given the rising awareness that women are trolled more than men. We analyzed data from our interviews using a constant comparative method and by immersing ourselves in the subjects' cultural and social norms to make meaning from their statements (McCracken, 1988). The dominant themes that arose were the nature of hate online, whether to engage, and organizational support.

Nature of Hate Online

Participants said that the nature of hate directed at them online was racist and misogynistic. The most bothersome part, some participants said, was the way comments referred "to some body part," and were "always sexual." These were clearly racist and often referenced the journalists' color and gender. For example, some online commenters seemed to assume that journalists of color would take both a gender- and race-biased angle with stories, writing about their "sisters," as one woman in our sample explained. Commenters felt that Black women journalists would not be objective in their reporting on issues facing Black communities.

One participant, from an outlet that focuses on race and social justice, said:

It's especially hard because we are producers for Black audiences and focus on Black issues. Color is important for us. But that also opens us up to people who openly are vitriolic. Sometimes I feel only racist people flock to our site.

Attacks singled out the women by their race or gender, or both. The women said the barbs were more personal than those aimed at men or even White women. A man might be called "stupid" for choosing certain sources in his story, but women journalists of color get attacked in a different way. For example, a Latina journalist reported being called a "needy

Hispanic" and peppered with misogynistic statements when she wrote a story about a rape victim who spoke out against President Donald Trump. "I have faced extreme misogyny and harassment," she explained. "I don't feel scared... I get trolled for my race and gender."

Hate online was sexist, but race also came into play, particularly for certain topics such as politics or immigration. One participant explained: "I get trolled for my race and gender. Mostly for my gender. Race too plays back sometimes like when I was covering the Clinton campaign and what she was doing for Hispanics." For example, one participant faced attacks when she wrote about the Black Lives Matter movement, which arose in response to a rash of police shootings of African Americans. "When I wrote about the violence surrounding the Black Lives Matter Movement, the F bomb was hurled at me in a way that I have never experienced before. It was a frenzy," she recalled.

Another journalist noted that the attacks make her feel as if the goal of her journalism—what she hopes to achieve in telling stories—didn't matter. Nasty commenters see her only as her race and gender: "They are misogynistic and aimed at my race and color. It is never about my work, never about my motivations," she explained. Women also reported visual attacks through pictures or memes that contain insults, such as bitch. Most often these came from anonymous accounts. As a Black TV journalist with two years' experience asked: "What do you say to someone who is calling you 'cunt' with a profile picture of a cucumber?" These attacks left the women perplexed and weighed heavily on their minds. The attacks also reinforced their marginalization as women, and as female journalists of color.

Deciding Whether to Engage

A second theme that emerged in our interviews was whether the women journalists of color should engage with hateful comments online. Most in our sample choose not to. As one participant said: "They are misogynistic and aimed at my race and color. I am not about to school White privilege, so I don't engage. I get the most vitriol on Facebook. That surprises me." Other women echoed this experience of heightened attacks on Facebook, particularly on the women's public pages that their employers required they maintain. The women weren't sure why Facebook elicited more abuse but posited that it may be because that platform doesn't limit the length of the posts. On Twitter, women found it easier to block

trolls although the trolls often just created a new account and attacked again.

Many women in our sample said they try to read comments on their stories but are cautious about responding back. A Black newspaper journalist said she considers all reader input important, even if it is negative. But she feels no need to respond. “They all start a conversation and that’s what my job as a journalist is. I am here to make people think,” she said. “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 commenters.” Yet some of the journalists we interviewed did choose to engage. They felt that opening a dialogue, showing trolls that they were conversing with an actual human being, and being firm, eased the situation. As one interviewee, with 10 years of television experience, said:

...directly engaging such people doesn’t help. They are doing it for a reaction anyway. But once when I reacted [for a story on a transwoman], and it did shut them down. I responded saying everyone was human and had a place in the world.

A few women said that in spite of the hate, comments sometimes provided valuable tips, access to sources, and constructive suggestions that often sparked different angles for stories. But because of incivility, many often avoided looking carefully at comments and may have lost out on useful information.

Online harassment did not deter them from doing their best in their jobs, the women said, but it did have negative effects on the way they worked. As one participant said: “I don’t feel scared. So that doesn’t affect the way I do my stories but personally they do affect me. I often overthink certain angles and [am] extra vigilant that all angles are covered.” Participants said that they often re-read stories ensuring that they had covered everything possible. They doubted their judgment and it took them longer to file their stories. Respondents were clear that although they “hated” receiving upsetting messages online, abuse against sources was even more galling. Journalists were protective of their interviewees for stories, especially those who are poor and powerless. As one participant said: “Rude comments can influence sources. I have to tell them that they are just mean people and have to be ignored. There’s always a sense that we may have betrayed the source in some way.

Three participants who joined the profession before the rise of the internet said that they viewed online commenting as a sort of letter to the editor that happened faster and enabled them to react in real time. They often responded, even to the hate, because they believed that by not responding they would be excluded from the reciprocal social media experiences that are part of today’s evolving newsrooms.

Some of the journalists we interviewed said they often did not engage because they did not believe that people who used abusive words and terms to describe their stories wanted a real conversation. But sometimes they were torn, especially if their publication catered to niche audiences, such as Black audiences.

Lack of Organizational Support

Our final theme reflects respondents’ concern that although their organizations were aware of online harassment or even threats, they did very little to support the women when attacked. Our interviewees urged news organizations to implement policies to deter abusers and to help journalists. As one said: “The belief that targets of abuse have a social responsibility to protect themselves is not enough. Our content gets them the page views that gets the advertisers and revenue. We need more checks and balances.” Although the women could speak to editors and supervisors, who often understood the issues, these conversations did little to stop the abuse or make the online space safer. Organizations are not equipped to handle incivility online. Some supervisors were aware of what the women faced and were sympathetic but did not know how to help. So, although they were open to conversations, little was done to ensure safer online experiences. For example, as one participant said:

I get a lot of sexist comments. Our readers are mostly men. I remember this one story; my boss wrote a funny headline for. Our readers thought I had written it. Since most of our readers are men, they accused me of hating men and wanting them to get hurt. Finally, my boss had to step in and say, ‘I am a man and I wrote that headline.’

Our participants said that most supervisors are White men, to whom trolling about race and gender seemed alien. Although some supervisors did try to understand the problem, our participants felt that they needed more concrete reassurances. Few news organizations had programs to directly deal

with this issue, or resources to moderate and monitor comments on social media.

Although some sympathetic editors and supervisors are open to talking about the issue, some employers just seemed to pay lip service to the problem. One interviewee said her employer asked her to conceal her identity online to prevent abuse. “I am young, and I work in a medium that’s visual. I can’t hide my color. Nor do I want to. But sometimes I get scared and wish people didn’t say these things,” she said. Many of our interviewees said their organizations provide some guidance for responding to abusive comments. “We have strict rules on how we enter such conversations. I identify myself and I try to clarify things. I am forthright and straightforward when I do enter such conversations,” said one participant. But such clarity is often not rewarded. Trolls come back with redoubled vigor and find new reasons to be abusive. Rarely has intervention from the journalist resolved issues; only one participant described a positive experience. A man, who had clearly identified himself, was abusing her for her religion (Islam) and gender. She told him she was just trying to do her job to the best of her ability. She got an apology, and they actually had a fruitful interaction.

Some journalists we interviewed could block nasty commenters, but the women felt pressured not to do this because their news organizations wanted them to have high numbers of followers on social media. They thought long and hard about blocking or deleting accounts in spite of the tension brought about by the incivility.

Combatting Dangers Online

If these interviews are anything to go by, commenting and promoting stories on social media has not really helped make journalism more democratic, nor has it created precious channels of interaction and information exchange. The goal of true reciprocity between the audience and the journalist (Lewis et al., 2014) is hampered by the hurtful and biting words hurled at women journalists of color. The sexism and racism permeating our society and our legacy media (Campbell, 1995; Hall, 1992) reign in the digital space as well. The online vitriol that all journalists face (Chen & Pain, 2017) and that particularly targets women (Chen et al., 2018) is heightened for female journalists of color. The reinforcing power of the dominant group, White men, casts female journalists of color as the other (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012) online, interrupting

the ease with which they can do their jobs. The threat of racist and sexist barbs makes journalists look over their shoulders too often. Although journalists are encouraged to engage and grow new audiences (Lewis et al., 2014), media organizations appear to be doing little to deal with the fallout from the abuse. Some supervisors are sympathetic, but others are not. And even supervisors who appreciate the problem have few resources to combat it or to help the women recover. All too often, female journalists of color are left on their own to protect themselves as they try to do their jobs.

Yet what is a viable solution to the issue? Some media organizations have required that commenters use a real name or register to prevent incivility (Ksiazek, 2015), but that does little to prevent abuse on social media. And even with these measures uncivil attacks continue (Chen, 2017). We suggest that news organizations need to do more. They must train their employees to better understand how technology works and provide concrete guidance for countering attacks. They should also moderate and monitor their comment sections, take women’s complaints of abuse seriously, and take action against repeat offenders. Engaging online is part of a journalist’s job today, and news organizations must make these spaces safer. It shouldn’t be up to the women journalists of color, themselves, to fix the problem.

IT’S YOUR TURN: WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

1. Divide yourselves in three groups. Find three news stories on the same politically charged topic, such as immigration or Black Lives Matter. One group finds a story written by a White man, the second group finds a story written by a White woman, and the third group finds a story written by a woman of color. Compare the comments on each story and discuss why they may differ.
2. Look in an online newspaper for articles written by women of color about politics and immigration. Read the comments. To what extent (and how) are the comments uncivil? Did commenters seem to use their real names, and how did this seem to affect their comments? To what extent and how were pictorial memes used in the comments?
3. Imagine your job is to make the online space safe for women journalists of color. You have an unlimited budget and unlimited power to change the structure of online comments or social media. What would you change to make the online space more civil place? What impact do you think that might have on society?

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7.2: AND THEN THERE WERE TWO: TELLING THE COMING OUT STORIES OF JASON COLLINS AND MICHAEL SAM IN SPORTS MEDIA

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The authors interviewed people involved in telling the stories about Jason Collins’ and Michael Sam’s coming out, including reporters, sports leagues, and athletes.

In 2013, when professional basketball player Jason Collins came out as gay in major news and sports media, it was an international sports and celebrity story. Less than a year later, University of Missouri standout football player Michael Sam came out in the months preceding his selection in the NFL Draft. LGBTQ athletes had been participating in sports long before these announcements, yet these two cases became the two biggest gay sports stories to date—other out athletes were not part of a team sport (diver Greg Louganis, tennis player Billie Jean King) or came out after retirement (basketball’s John Amaechi, football’s Ryan O’Callaghan).

In an era in which gay rights were embraced by a majority of the population for the first time (Moscovitz, 2013), sport became a vehicle for broader conversations about LGBTQ equality. The stories of Jason Collins and Michael Sam became a part of national narratives about gay rights even for non-sports fans. To explore the impact of these coming out stories, we interviewed people involved in these stories, including reporters, sports leagues, and athletes. We examine the role media play in facilitating both celebratory themes and conflicting narratives, and assess the potential for these mediated stories to improve the future for gay athletes—and those outside of sport—thus building a more inclusive culture.

How the Stories Unfolded: Differing Media Strategies

Both Collins’ and Sam’s coming out stories were told through carefully orchestrated strategic media and public relations plans. However, Jason Collins’ story took place over the course of several months whereas Michael Sam’s unfolded more quickly. Collins utilized his agent, Arn Tellem, to determine the most appropriate media strategy, and Sam relied on Howard