

## “SUDDENLY WE WERE THE STORY”

### Women Journalists, the #MeToo Movement, & Online Misogyny in India

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#### Introduction

Rana Ayyub, an outspoken columnist with *The Washington Post* in India, has been an informed and vocal critic of the current Indian prime minister Narendra Modi. Her deeply investigative features on the government’s anti-Muslim policies and sectarian politics have been instrumental in warning the world about the nonsecular politics in the country and have garnered her unprecedented online hate. This has been so relentless that UN human rights experts have gone on record to state that she has been subjected to “judicial harassment,” and they have repeatedly urged Indian authorities to investigate “promptly” the “relentless misogynistic and sectarian” attacks on social media against her (Al Jazeera, 2022). Earlier in the year, she had received online threats of physical assault and death, and one person had even been arrested in connection with this.

Gender-based online harassment includes stalking, cyberbullying hate speech, abusive language, sexual innuendo filled obscenities, targeted smear campaigns, and doxing (Hinson et al., 2018), and Ayyub is no stranger to the different forms of networked persecution. Besides death threats, proprietors of various right-wing journalistic ventures spread misinformation about her and the stories she covers. Two journalists from the online media platform The Scoop Beats were arrested after Ayyub registered a police complaint, seeking justice for “targeted harassment” and “fake news” (International Federation of Journalists, 2022). Today, Ayyub is among the most well-known faces of women journalists from India who experience relentless harassment online for the work they do and for daring to professionally identify as journalists from a minority (Muslim) community (Perrigo, 2021).

Engaging with audiences online sees more women journalists, especially those associated with television reporting face ferocious torment that is rarely focused

on their work but rather targeted at their person, religion, sexuality, and gender (Chen et al., 2020; Pain, 2017). In a comprehensive report on digital journalism and its risks, authors Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison, and Waisbord (2020) emphasized that online violence was gradually becoming “a new frontline in journalism safety – a particularly dangerous trend for women journalists.” A UNESCO supported survey of nearly 1,000 women journalists conducted by the International Women’s Media Foundation and the International News Safety Institute showed that 23% of women respondents had experienced some sort of “intimidation, threats or abuse” online in connection to their work. Globally, as various documentation shows, the numbers of these attacks are only increasing (Waisbord, 2020a; Waisbord, 2020b). For India, this has important implications, especially around gender and journalism.

India, a country with a very dynamic media scene that is “driven by a growing middle class...” (BBC India country profile) and a rich relationship with civil society, each gaining from and strengthening the other, suffers from the issue of misogynistic newsrooms (Chen et al., 2020; Pain, 2017). Women journalists must deal with a plethora of “everyday sexism and workplace sex discrimination” (Chadha et al., 2017, p. 20) that often prevents them from fully developing their professional identities. Women also leave journalism due to harassment and the lack of organizational support. India’s growing media scene with its rising digital-only newsrooms is still young and has had little impact in addressing this misogyny. Misogynistic newsrooms are no secret, but today as journalists are encouraged to publicize stories, interact with audiences and develop social media identities, another layer of harassment has been added to the experiences of journalists, especially women journalists (Chen et al., 2020; Pain, 2017). Having an online presence can mean gendered harassment that newsrooms have little wherewithal to address. The recent explosion of #MeTooIndia that dragged out into the open horrific narratives of how women reporters, interns, and other positions are treated in the newsrooms finally saw journalists and other media personnel sharing stories of how sexual abuse and harassment perpetuated in the newsroom has further complicated an already complex scenario. While journalists used social media very effectively to out abusers and report harassment, there was little to protect them from the misogynistic vitriol they were forced to encounter online (Chen & Pain, 2017).

As the *New York Times* reported, “After a year of fits and starts, India’s #MeToo movement has leapt forward over the past week, getting concrete action in two of the country’s most powerful industries: entertainment and the news media” (Goel et al., 2018). Like the US, in India, the movement saw participants from the film, entertainment, and mainstream media sharing stories, advocating on behalf of survivors, and ensuring that different voices found space. Studies on the #MeToo hashtag have focused on how Twitter emerged as a space where participants and activists could name and initiate decisive action against abusers, some of whom were influential men in public positions, and how such digital spaces provided a much-needed impetus to the movement and in the process

brought to the forefront and encouraged public deliberation around issues of gendered sexual violence in the workplace. The #MeTooIndia Twitter handle had the word India added to it to differentiate it from the US hashtag. As the movement gained momentum, journalists, and activists organized and presented tweets from all over the country showcasing a variety of experiences and voices. Women from different walks of life created networks to connect and amplify voices. For journalists, it was more than a matter of being a participant. Suddenly, they as a profession were thrust into the limelight. As one reporter with 10 years of experience in a national newspaper said, “Suddenly we were the story” (Personal Interview, 2020).

Journalism may now be recognized as one of the most dangerous professions globally (Jamil, 2020) and with the rise of digital platforms, journalists are subject to a multitude of online harassment, increased surveillance, and other digital threats (India, 2019; Jamil & Muschert, 2020; Sohal, 2020). Press freedom is guaranteed by India’s Constitution, but as the recently released 2020 World Press Freedom Index has shown, India is now ranked at 142, down two places from 2019. Journalists are murdered with impunity and as the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists has noted, in 2021, four Indian journalists were killed for their work while seven others were imprisoned on various charges. With the #MeTooIndia movement, narratives that focused mostly on women survivors exposed the horrific and gendered nature of crime in some of the country’s largest and most influential news dailies. It compelled a reckoning with gender that Indian media had until then been unwillingly to face. Inspired by the work of Waisbord (2020) that has examined how journalists, globally, in the digital realm are trolled and the disadvantages associated with digital publicizing of news and narratives, this study gauges how, in a rapidly digitizing world, journalists deal with publics that have now moved online, and the impact of online harassment and misogyny on their work and professional identities. In the process, it also examines what journalists think about interactivity, the public they are often forced to engage with, and the impact of incivility. This investigation explores the experiences of the journalists who covered the movement and examines the changes that a movement this influential may have brought about in newsrooms through the lens of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy.

This study is among the earliest that investigate the impact of the #MeToo movement on newsrooms, journalists, and aspects of digitization on the news media scene in India. As an area of research, investigating how journalists work with uncivil audiences on social media and comment sections may be drawing scholarly attention, but this topic needs more investigation since research has shown that nearly 20% of comments (Coe et al., 2014) are uncivil in nature and both journalists and audiences are concerned about their impact (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Meltzer, 2015). Documenting the amount, impact, and nature of online harassment is necessary across the globe (Waisbord, 2020a). Focus on the impact of #MeToo, both as a social media movement and as activism that lays bare the abuse that women face in media, provides an opportunity to explore

the experiences of journalists in India in a post-#MeTooIndia social and online media space and its implications for the future of journalism in the developing world.

### Gender in the Newsroom

A 2017 study (Pain, 2017, p. 1319) quotes a woman political reporter saying that women journalists in India “were not taken seriously” and that “[m]en think that beat reporting is their preserve especially the political beat. It’s a complete boy’s club sort of situation out there.” Over the years, little seems to have changed in this aspect. As Kanagasabai (2016) has shown, the impact of liberalization and globalization on the construction of the gendered self within the space of Indian English-language television newsrooms has made little difference. The newsroom in India continues to be a highly masculine space in which women often enact masculine traits for legitimacy and approval. Kanagasabai also emphasized how many younger female journalists want to dissociate from the “feminist” tag, saying they do not need a theoretical label to assert their strength and identity. Media coverage of gender violence does not often show critical engagement with or analysis of issues as social incidents; survivors are often shamed, and most coverage is sensational and patriarchal in nature (Drèze & Sen, 2013). When it comes to sexual assault, media are extremely biased and nonintersectional in nature. Even with the advent of globalization and private television channels, coverage of such crimes is extremely focused on middle class women, such that marginalized women rarely find space and issues of resources, caste, and gender are rarely balanced (Rao, 2014). This leaning toward the urban middle class is reflected on social media and thus perpetuates a bias in the way journalists use social media to report abuse. For example, as Belair-Gagnon et al. (2014) have shown in their interviews with journalists in India, many journalists use Twitter for gathering background information because the most important events are usually city based and involve people with access to technology like Twitter. Rising numbers of digital users ensure that most media outlets have an online presence.

### Digitization in India

In 2022, a report by Dentsu International, one of the largest marketing and advertising agency networks in the world, stated that digital media in India was expected to grow at 29.5% compound annual growth rate to reach a market size of Rs 35,809 crore by 2023 (Business India, 2022). India is also considered the second-fastest digital adopter among 17 major digital economies (Kohli, 2021) with Internet penetration pegged at 627 million in 2019. Facebook leads the user base with about 93 million users, with Twitter following closely behind with 33 million users (Statista, 2019). Digital advances have also led to internet-only media startups, which are leading innovation by developing distinct content and social media approaches and mobile first news. Traditional mainstream media

and international technology companies are their main competition (Nielsen & Sen, 2016).

### Journalism and Digitization

With the emergence of the digital media and with more mainstream media creating a presence online, the professional identity of journalists and the profile of what constitutes the “job” of a journalist have undergone a change. As Santana and Russial (2013) have shown, the rise of digitization has meant that today being a journalist also may include telling stories in videos, pictures, and audio, whereas earlier journalists gathered facts and told stories while audio and photos were the domain of other specialists. Today, all these spheres have connected to create the multimedia journalist who gathers facts, takes photos, and creates videos as well and maintains an active social media presence. This shift has also seen the advent of multimedia gatekeeping which is extremely emphasized in sports journalism (English, 2017), and while journalists can have a vibrant presence online, the information they share and disseminate must be within the bounds set by employer guidelines (Sullivan, 2015). A Hoot survey . . . found that 57% of journalists used both Twitter and Facebook, while an additional 28% used only Facebook and an additional 11% used only Twitter. Only 4% reported using neither Facebook nor Twitter. When it comes to covering rape, Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, and Agur (2014) have shown that both foreign correspondents based in India and Indian journalists in the mainstream media have used Twitter as their dominant social media platform during the Delhi gang rape coverage, more than Facebook, LinkedIn, and others.

### Trolling and Online Spaces

Globally, online harassment of women journalists is on the rise (Chen et al., 2020; Waisbord, 2020b). As various studies have shown, female journalists in India have had a long history of facing and dealing with professional harassment (Pain, 2017; Pain, 2021). Digital spaces and the benefits they offer are well understood in India. Thus, journalists are not just encouraged to have social media profiles but also interactions with audiences, promoting stories and exploring sources are job requirements, normalized as part of journalists’ routines (Chen & Pain, 2017). While “the mushrooming growth of social media services hugely expanded the scope of content generation and sharing” (Pradhan & Kumari, 2018), the harassment of journalists online has also become routine. Journalists have identified this as extremely harmful to their work, creating unfortunate dilemmas for female journalists. Social media presence is a job requirement, and this also exposes them to harassment that is detrimental to the way they function as professionals (Chen et al., 2020). India has a high rate of internet penetration, with about 93 million using Facebook and 33 million using Twitter (Statista, 2019). The most active users are feminist activists, journalists, students,

[AU: We have changed the year from "(Halder & Jaishankar (2016))" to "(Halder & Jaishankar (2011))" to match with reference list. Please confirm this is fine.

and young men and women from middle income families (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014), but most issues arise from the way gender is viewed in the country. In their seminal work on cybercrime in the country, Halder & Jaishankar (2011) have shown that the presence of women online is deemed a threat to masculinity that demands unrealistic notions of chaste behavior. Thus, women online are often trolled with deeply sexual slurs and threats that seek to publicly shame them (Gudipaty, 2017). Men and male journalists too are trolled online, but this is different from the kind of trolling women face. Men are generally shamed for being "stupid" or "bad at their work," but the abuse is rarely sexual.

As Waisbord (2020a) has emphasized, online harassment in the USA has been driven by the rise of right-wing politics and a hatred toward minorities, women, and the mainstream press. In India, we see similar patterns. Muslim journalists who are outspoken against sectarian politics are doxed with alarming frequency. *The Columbia Journalism Review* (2022) recently reported on an app known as "Bulli Bai" that doxed reporters like Ayyub, displaying more than a hundred women "for sale as maids." More than 100 photos of Muslim women including prominent actresses, journalists, and politicians were posted for auction on the application (Jaswal, 2022). The news website Scoop Beats created a video around a manipulated tweet where Ayyub is shown saying that she hates India. Once law personnel got involved, the video was taken down but not before threats against Ayyub intensified. Further exacerbating the problem of online harassment of women journalists, the political regime in power today is aware of the power of social media and utilizes it effectively, working with public relations practitioners and social media experts to increase reach and influence. They also use their digital tools to malign and endanger online spaces for journalists with impunity. In a recent investigation by digital only publication *The Wire*, an app called "Tek Fog," developed by the ruling party, targeted journalists by creating targeted hashtags, and different WhatsApp groups via this app. Female journalists were clearly targeted and responses to their tweets contained profanity. As Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison, and Waisbord (2020) note in their global study, online trolls range from mobs with misogynistic intent to state-sponsored campaigns aimed at silencing women and scaring into submission any kind of critical journalism through a multitude of well-designed digital attacks (Ayyub, 2022; Rodrigues, 2019). Even though the Editors Guild of India condemned

The continued online harassment of women journalists, which includes targeted and organized online trolling as well as threats of sexual abuse.... targeted at journalists, who have been outspokenly critical of the current government and the ruling party, to silence them.

News organizations do little to help women journalists deal with online trolling. Many women journalists do not report their online trolling because organizations are often reluctant to help (Gudipaty, 2017).

Ghosh (2020) has shown that when it comes to dealing with online vitriol, women's complaints are often disregarded by the law, and arrests for online hate speech are usually the exceptions. Considering the different factors that play into online harassment, this study uses the concepts of professional reflexivity and collective professional autonomy to investigate and understand the complexities and conflicts professional women journalists must navigate as they deal with ensuring a presence on social media, and the negative fallout this presence entails. Professional reflexivity refers to the ability of journalists to reflect on journalists' capacity for self-awareness (González de Bustamante, & Relly, 2016) and "recognize the different influences and changes in their environment, and alter the course of their actions, and renegotiate their professional self-images as a result" (Ahva, 2013, p. 791; see also Pain & Korin, 2021). The theoretical framework of professional reflexivity is a chance for journalists to contemplate and consider the different influences and impacts on their occupation, specifically in this case the use, identities and the impact of the #MeTooIndia movement on their social and online presence. The study also examines the different strategies that the women use to counter online harassment and thus uses the lens of professional autonomy to understand the level of freedom journalists have, or they feel they have, to deal with trolls and other online nastiness. In a global context, Reese (2001, p. 174) has emphasized that "professionalism is a problematic concept, consisting of many values held in tension, which different national groups balance in their own way," for the concept of professionalism has "different levels of meaning," in the hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) where autonomy as "a fluid concept that is continually adjusted to manage the daily task of reporting the news" (Sjoavaag, 2013, p. 1) can add different nuances. In this light, this study asks four research questions:

- RQ1:** What are the defining themes and discourses raised by the comments that journalists face on social media and online commenting spaces?
- RQ2:** What are the promises and pitfalls of having an online presence as shown through the experiences of female journalists?
- RQ3:** To what extent do journalists exhibit the characteristics of professional reflexivity and autonomy when dealing with online abuse?
- RQ 4:** What strategies do they use to deal with online incivility?

## Methods

This study qualitatively analyzes data from 20 in-depth interviews. A qualitative method was deemed the most suitable approach since our purpose was to explore "social reality in subjects' perceptions of their environment" (Bryman, 1988, p. 70). Female journalists who have covered #MeTooIndia were identified from the stories they have covered in different media in India and sent interview requests. Requests were also posted on social media like Twitter and Facebook.

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Purposive snowball sampling (Welch, 1975) was also done for referrals to colleagues in order to ensure that a wide range of media organizations were reached. A total of 20 journalists were interviewed at this time with experiences ranging from five to ten years of work with different media as full-time journalists in different mainstream media organizations.

## Findings

This study examines four main research questions that investigate the defining themes and discourses raised by the comments that journalists face on social media and online commenting spaces, the promises and pitfalls of having an online presence, strategies used to deal with audiences online, and the extent to which journalists exhibit the characteristics of professional reflexivity when dealing with online abuse. The findings reveal that journalists are trolled mercilessly online. The defining themes of the online trolling focus on their work as women and as journalists and especially on the work they did for the #MeTooIndia movement. Their work on survivors of sexual assault is belittled and there is a distinct right-wing flavor to the content of the vitriol directed at them. Clearly, there are huge drawbacks associated with their online presences, but the journalists have certain approaches that they feel can protect them from online harassment. The sample of journalists interviewed said that their “moves” (Personal Interview, 2021) on social media were reflective of the ways they viewed their professions. They felt that they had professional autonomy, but this certainly could be increased with institutional support. These findings are explicated in detail.

### *RQ1: Defining Themes and Discourses*

*#MeTooIndia is a weapon of abuse:* Journalist who had covered the #MeTooIndia movement and had specifically mentioned the story on their social media were abused for their work. Their work was used to dehumanize and insult them, and they were called misogynistic names. The word “FemiNAZI” was common, and they were called “sluts” who had “enjoyed the attention.” Tweets like “Women already got more privileges and entitlements compared to men and enjoying their over empowerment. #FeminismIsCancer #Feminazis #MeTooIndia” were plentiful. Their coverage of the #MeTooIndia was used as a weapon against them. For example, one journalist, who had recently covered the rape of a minor, was abused as being a “MeToo bitch” who propagated sexual abuse under the guise of news coverage. Her tweet (in support of the #MeTooIndia), “#MeToo #MeTooIndia is the best example in the recent time of women standing up for women together and believing each other against harassment and exploitation at workplace,” immediately bought forth a barrage of abusive tweets on Twitter, and later this was linked to different abusive conversations related to the work

done by journalists especially if their stories involved the coverage of sexual abuse. For example:

Journalist A woke up this morning and thought about how she could attack innocent men. hence her story about the so-called rape of .... But then. What can we expect from her...she after all thinks that the '#MeToo #MeTooIndia is the best example in the recent time of women standing ...' Remember? REMEMBER?

*A "bad" career choice:* Many of the journalists interviewed online had also covered the #MEtooIndia movement where they had done extensive interviews with the survivors of assault and helped amplify their voices. Their work was condemned online. One story titled "India's newsrooms are a den of misogyny" drew extreme ire. The journalist interviewed said she took the story down after a week when the trolling got extremely sexual, and she got tired of blocking out the different direct messages targeting her on all her social media including Twitter and Instagram. Many of the comments focused on how journalism was a bad career choice for women, especially since "women can only see one sides things." Some of the journalists also covered stories on how unsafe public spaces were for women, especially when the #MetooIndia was at its peak and these stories drew a great deal of vitriol. Two journalists candidly confessed that they had reduced the number of stories that had done on women's safety since then. As one participant with five years of print media experience said:

I really wanted to make women's issues a beat here in my organization. I also wanted to train new journalists joining in and encourage them to be a part of this collective. But clearly the trolling...the viciousness where people often call and start abusing on the phone...it isn't worth it.

*Anti-India and anti-national:* Some of the abuse directed at specific journalists was distinctly about them covering women's issues, which was viewed as being anti-national and anti-Indian. The right-wing government in India which is pushing a right-wing agenda in the country consisting of emphasizing the superiority of particular religions saw minority journalists being targeted. Just the way Rana Ayyub was targeted, the journalists interviewed for this study also emphasized that issues that were related to women's safety often drew abuse related to their religion and minority status. One journalist with about seven years of television experience said:

My name clearly spells out my religion. After a story I had done on women and the local trains, my Twitter profile photo was snatched, and false profile was created where I was said to be a slut...my phone number was published, and I had to change my number ...the harassment was extreme

and nerve wracking. I was accused of being a traitor and asked to go to Pakistan.

Being asked to go to Pakistan is a common refrain for the journalists targeted, especially if they were from minority communities.

*Weak organizational response:* As the journalists interviewed said, it was not as if their organizations denied the abuse. Nor did they refuse to listen or demean the complaints. But institutions had very weak responses to the complaints. For example, one journalist with over ten years of experience said that her organization would ask her to get off social media for a few days or block trolls, but they had no social media policy to deal with trolls nor were personnel equipped to find and effectively block them.

### ***RQ2: Promises and Pitfalls of Having an Online Presence***

The journalists were very aware that using social media and having a social media presence was helpful in their work. Besides the trolling, a majority of those interviewed said that social media often helped them reach out to audiences they otherwise would not have considered. As one journalist with over 8 years of television experience said:

I was once doing a story on the police helpline when the Twitter responses to this helpline caught my eye. I realized that while the helpline was very responsive to one part of the state, they were not great with calls to another part. I saw repeated appeals for help from some women and interviewed them for a story that helped improve the reach and effectiveness of the service. This would not have happened without Twitter.

But as the trolling and other ineffective tweets about their work poured in, the journalists in the sample for this study deeply reflected on whether social media was necessary in their work, especially considering its advantage and disadvantages. A common theme in these reflections was the intense emotional labor that they had to undertake as they were forced to deal with trolls and other abuse themselves. The journalists were, however, able to develop strategies to combat the abuse. They created tangible support systems and helped each other. Journalist retweeted the stories that they had done and supported each other during particularly vicious attacks. For example, one reporter with five years of experience posted that her household help was being targeted by a gang on her way to work. Immediately trolls said that she was probably “asking for it since that’s what women do to cry rape,” and this could have escalated, but other journalists immediately posted helpline numbers to call and requested the police to help by tweeting at legal organizations. But this labor was all their own work and they generously gave their time and effort to protect each other, as they “belonged to the same tribe” (Personal interview, 2022).

### **RQ3: Professional Reflexivity and Professional Autonomy**

The journalists were deeply disappointed in the weak organizational response that they often received. As many of them said, this made dealing with the abuse “worse” (Personal interview, 2022). As one reporter with ten years of multimedia experience mentioned:

My organization is sympathetic. But they have no solutions. I also think they do not give this issue much thought. Blocking out abusers or not responding is not a solution. Once one troll told me that they knew where my five-year-old went to school. When I complained the organization was sympathetic but took no concrete steps towards rectifying the issue.

*(Personal interview, 2022)*

Reactions of this kind made the women reporters feel “unheard” (Personal interview, 2022). “We are encouraged to interact with the public online,” said one journalist. “But what do you say to people who threaten to rape you?” As they reflected on how this impacted their work, they were clear that staying off social media was no solution because “that cut us off from vital public” (Personal interview, 2021). They were aware that with India’s internet penetration, people were voicing opinions and speaking up on issues online. They wanted to ensure that trolling did not cut them off from this. Some were even willing to listen to trolls as they felt that “even those who disagreed with us is a part of the audience who we must seek out” (Personal interview, 2022). But they did not want to engage with those comments that were overtly sexual as that made them “deeply uncomfortable” (Personal interview, 2022). Three confessed to having to deal with anxiety and as one of them with six years of television experience said:

I would keep randomly checking my Instagram feed to see if there were any more...I became twitchy...you know what I mean...I couldn’t keep still. Therapy and medication finally calmed me down and I realized that I must learn to let go.

Their relationship with their audiences, the sources, and the people who read their work were clearly of utmost importance. They also realized the value of social media for putting them in touch with voices they would not, perhaps, have otherwise had access to. They were clear that, trolls or no trolls, they did not want to lose touch or in any way disserve their reading public. Their reflections helped to also talk about the strategies they used on trolls and how some of these approaches were successful.

Even in a post-#MeTooIndia world, newsrooms seemed very blind to addressing the harassment these women journalists faced, but something had clearly changed. As the women interviewed for this study emphasized, while it was clear that little was being done, at least “organizations were willing to

have a dialogue” (Personal interview, 2021). This made them hopeful that soon they would be willing to put in more technical advancements and expertise that would help them fight these attacks.

#### **RQ4: Strategies and Solutions**

The journalists were clear that organizational responses must become stronger. Since organizational responses were lacking, they worked to help each other deal with online torment. As one journalist with 8 years of multimedia experience said:

When I see a colleague getting trolled whether she belongs to my organization or not I always jump in to help. Once I asked a troll to back off... literally using the words in capital letters. We didn't hear back so I guess it worked!

As one reporter with five years of television experience said, she would block out the trolls when they got personal and used threats of physical assault. But as a majority said, ignoring them did not help. As one journalist with 5 years of experience said: “Ignoring them made them feel that we were scared. They redoubled back with renewed vigor.” Three of the journalists interviewed said that they had stopped posting stories on the serious issues they worked on. As one journalist with 8 years of experience said:

When I had started out earlier there was little demand and requirement on us to post on social media. When I would post my earlier stories, I had a few followers who would either like or ignore the piece. Later this grew to a deluge and so now I often don't post the stories I do because it takes simply too long to sift thorough and find useful comments. Most aren't about the story any way.

*(Personal interview, 2021)*

A few others, especially those with higher years of expertise, said they had stopped posting stories that they had enjoyed the most doing. As one reporter with 6 years of multimedia experience said: “I enjoy doing stories around the health care concerns of rural women. I also get trolled viciously on them. So, these days I post only the puff pieces online. My emotional investment in them is the least” (Personal interview, 2022).

Some journalists tried to engage in dialogue with trolls. They tried to explain their point of view but, as one reporter with 5 years of multimedia experience said, that “set them off worse” (Personal interview, 2022). Stories that focused on women, politics and sports were the ones that drew the most vitriol. The women wanted better social media managers and social media policies in place that would make clear for all users, including journalists and commentators,

which kind of comments would and would not be tolerated. They were clear that better moderation would be beneficial for all, including those who shared and commented on their stories because “we genuinely want to spark conversations with our work” (Personal interview, 2021). They wanted more moderation of what they shared. As one journalist with 6 years of multimedia experience said:

I am extremely open to more training about social media use and ways we get the most benefit out of it. It's extremely important to learn the mechanics behind it all and I wish we had more access to training to do this.

*(Personal interview, 2021)*

The journalists clearly believed that they had autonomy, and with more training and more awareness of how to work better with social media they could get the most benefit from that autonomy, as well as provide their audiences with the best benefits as well. There was deep willingness to engage in learning and interacting in healthy ways with audiences and in the process dealing with abuse and trolls. They also emphasized that their professional autonomy was certainly stronger since the #MeTooIndia movement, but they could not display this empathically online because they had few resources to deal with the negative fallout that might follow.

## Discussion

Inspired by the work of Waisbord (2020a; Waisbord, 2020b) that looks at how online misogyny and trolling work as “mob censorship,” this study explored the online experiences of women journalists in India and examined how online misogyny is impacting their work and professional identities. In the process, it extends the scope of scholarly attention to the international context in the developing world and is among the earliest investigations into the significance of the #MeTooIndia movement on newsrooms and journalists with a digital presence in India.

The journalists interviewed for this study were clearly encouraged to interact with audiences and have active profiles online. But they more than their male colleagues faced online abuse that was clearly aimed at their gender and often religious minority status and rarely focused what the content of their stories (Chen et al., 2020; Pain, 2017). Since these were also reporters who had covered the #MeTooIndia movement in the country, their work was used as a weapon against their professions which was deemed to be a “bad career” selection. They were called feminazis for voicing their rights and some of the attacks were clearly designed to question their right to be in the country. When their stories were critical of the government's policies, especially related to women, the abuse was particularly vitriolic. Some of the uncivil comments aimed at them also called in to question their loyalty toward the country. They were deemed “anti-national” and “anti-Indian” for their efforts and especially if they were from minority religions. Organizational responses in many cases were weak. While the journalists

were heard sympathetically, little was done to really help address or resolve the issues. This weak institutional response made some of the journalists feel that this was deliberate and another way of negating the issue as something that affected women alone and therefore was not worth considering at the institutional level.

Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison, & Waisbord (2020) emphasized that online violence was gradually becoming “a new frontline in journalism safety—a particularly dangerous trend for women journalists.” But in India, media organizations have yet to respond to this as strongly as they should, even though the process of dealing with online trolls has certainly taken a negative toll. The #MeTooIndia movement may have forced a consideration of gender that for India media had been a long time coming. As the interviews exhibited, the journalists demonstrated various characteristics of professional reflexivity and autonomy when dealing with online abuse, from examining different strategies to deal with the vitriol, to requesting stronger social media moderation and policies. Journalists worked to create their own support networks and to support each other. They reduced interactions with the public. If they saw one from their “tribe” of fellow journalists being trolled, they banded together to fight the abuse. The journalists emphasized that they wanted to keep communication channels open, but this easy communication path that often led to important sources could also leave them open to harassment that they would rather avoid.

Some journalists stopped posting stories that really mattered to them. A majority said that social media gave them access to publics that they usually would not have had access to but they were willing to compromise this to avoid trolling. A startling fact was that the journalists did not only want institutional help, but they also wanted to be active agents in their social media use. They wanted to be trained and wanted to be enabled to stop online trolling. For organizations, the message is clear. If they want journalists in tune with their publics, the publics they need, they must have robust social media protocols in place.

This study analyses the social media experiences of women journalists from mainstream media in India. It does not consider how women reporters from primarily digital journalism outlets and alternative media. These are acknowledged weaknesses as is the small sample size that prevents the generalization of results. While the #MeTooIndia movement has at least made institutions more sensitive to the misogyny that women face online, newsrooms must consider more concrete ways of following up on preventing online trolling and abuse. As the impact of #MeTooIndia is felt in more organizations, future research must follow up on its repercussions to document and add to our understanding of gendered harassment and professional journalism.

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T&F Proofs – Not for Distribution

**PART III**

**Activism**

*T&F Proofs – Not for Distribution*

T&F Proofs – Not for Distribution