Online Harassment of Journalists in Austria

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August 2017

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Publisher	International Press Institute (IPI)
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OnTheLine is IPI's project to systematically monitor online harassment and digital attacks against journalists. Our mission is to build guidelines to counter online harassment and provide technical and legal response to victims of digital attacks.

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Executive summary

This report summarises the results of the three-month OnTheLine project in Austria, which aimed to collect, record and analyse insults and threats against journalists. The project sought to obtain a rough overview of the type, quantity, quality, occurrence and objective of online abuse against journalists. Two primary research methods were used over the three-month project period: social media monitoring and qualitative interviews of both experts in relevant fields as well as both prominent and less well-known journalists affected by online abuse.

The incidences of online abuse against journalists that were collected in Austria can be divided into two main categories: "Abusive Behaviour" and "Threats of Violence". The largest proportion of incidences were "verbal abuses", classfied as a subcategory of "Abusive Behaviour", i.e., everything from classic swear words to negative references to intelligence or physical appearance. In a few cases, journalists were also implicitly or explicitly threatened with violence. The abuse is almost always topic-related, occurring especially in connection with controversial, emotionally charged topics such as immigration or feminism. In general, the attacks against journalists are not random: Rather, individual journalists are singled out online and in some cases repeatedly attacked over an extended period. The abuse occurs on all platforms, both publicly and via private message. Facebook is particularly relevant. Generally, the abuse is greater in the private sphere – coming via email and Facebook Messenger – than in the public sphere. The Facebook pages of the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) play a special role here, with numerous offensive and threatening user comments appearing below posts critical of the media written by FPÖ politicians. For this reason, a quantitatively large portion of the abuse is connected to politics.

While Austrian journalists interviewed for the project state that there is no "self-censorship" due to online harassment, they also generally aware of the danger of the danger of widespread outrage on social media platforms ("Shitstorms") that is always lurking in the background. These journalists regard the invasiveness of the abuse differently. Many find it "annoying," especially during periods of intense abuse. Others, who are qualitatively and quantitatively more affected by abuse, regard the intense periods as very stressful, especially if the possibility of avoiding the abuse is limited because it comes via private message or Twitter, or because the newsroom and the community management department are not separated.

The way journalists deal with abuse varies, but most of those surveyed for the project feel the need to "communicate", in one way or another, what they consider the worst cases of abuse. Many of the journalists read the texts aloud to one other. Some publish screenshots of particularly extreme cases on their private profiles. Some try responding to the abusers, others report them to the authorities with mixed results. Many, especially female journalists, at some point restrict their presence on social networking sites.

Even though Austrian media outlets have taken measures in recent years to professionalise their community management departments and to offer support to affected journalists, awareness of the subject is still not sufficiently high. Most newsrooms lack structures and clearly communicated guidelines for dealing with online attacks against journalists.

1. Introduction

In 2016, the topic of online abuse – and in particular online abuse against journalists – finally gained the media attention in Austria that it deserved. In the summer of that year, Falter, a Vienna-based weekly, published an issue with four prominent women and journalists and the title "Uns reicht's!" ("We've had enough!") on the cover, kicking off a debate that quickly made waves in many other media, but also in political circles. Those who for years had been largely left to fend for themselves were now increasingly going public and receiving moral and legal support. At the same time, it was noted that while up until that point there had been many anecdotes regarding online abuse against journalists, little systematic research into the phenomenon existed. The aim of the OnTheLine project was therefore to obtain an overview of the extent and characteristics of online attacks and abuse against journalists in Austria.

2. Methodology

Over a period of three months (from September to the beginning of December 2016), the project monitored the social networks Facebook and Twitter, identified incidences of online abuse, and entered these incidences into a database. Instances of online harassment were divided into categories ("Abusive Behaviour", "Threats of Violence", "Technical Interference"). As resources did not permit constant monitoring of every possible site of harassment, research was necessarily selective, focusing on obtaining a "sample set" from those online sites and pages where, according to initial results and interviews with experts, the highest number were to be expected. In this sense, the project monitoring does not claim to be complete.

It became clear relatively quickly that the abuse in Austria occurred mainly in the political sphere and especially in connection with the FPÖ, i.e., on their official Facebook pages and those close to the party. This was reinforced by the fact that during the observation period, the second round of the Austrian presidential election was held, with the FPÖ's candidate, Norbert Hofer, taking part in many TV discussions. For this reason, monitoring placed a special focus on analysing and categorising comments found below the Facebook posts of leading FPÖ figures following controversial TV appearances.

In addition to the data work, the project also involved conducting qualitative interviews with affected persons and experts. This resulted in four case studies, each with a different focus (verbal abuse against young women journalists, abusive comments found below FPÖ posts in the run-up to the presidential election, strategies of Austrian media outlets on how deal with the problem, a description of an individual case), and a series of five video interviews.

3. Findings

3.1. What types of online abuse against journalists occur?

The project sample set consisted of 115 incidences of online abuse against journalists recorded during the observation period. With 107 incidences, "verbal abuse"made up by far the largest portion. These consisted primarily of "classic" verbal abuse in the form of swear words or negative references to intelligence or physical appearance. The incidences of threats were mainly implicit.

3.2. How does the abuse occur?

The results show that the abuse is almost always topic-related. Both editors and community managers say they know by now which topics will elicit a strong response in the form of problematic comments and attacks. In the last two years, the emotionally charged topics of immigration and Islam especially stand out, but feminist issues or articles dealing with women's sexuality also elicit strong reactions. The attacks are for the most part uncoordinated. In some cases, however, statements critical of particular journalists are posted to forums or message boards where an outpouring of vitriol against those journalists can be expected. Abuse is also directed at "the press" or a specific medium. Journalists themselves are not targeted randomly; rather, certain journalists are singled out. Women journalists remain particularly affected, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

3.3. Where does the abuse occur?

The abuse appears in all categories and on all platforms. Harassment that appears in the online comment sections of media outlets can be burdensome on journalists, but the ability of community managers to intervene either technically or manually is relatively high. More problematic are Facebook and Twitter, where comments appear immediately and resources prevent many media outlets from providing live monitoring. Still more troubling, however, are critical posts on the larger pages of third parties. Emails and above all Facebook messages are also a relevant source of hate. The abuse on Twitter is qualitatively high, but this particular platform is less present in Austria than in other countries.

3.4. Who is particularly affected?

This project, as research in other countries has suggested, confirmed that women journalists are disproportionately targeted by online abuse, both quantitatively and qualitatively.The type of abuse directed against women is also different: Women are more likely than men to be dismissed as incompetent and to be threatened with physical consequences, which makes the possibilities of dealing openly with the threats more difficult.

3.5. How is the abuse perceived by the individuals concerned?

The affected journalists perceive the abuse as varyingly invasive. Male journalists in particular say that they are relatively indifferent to abuse. Many women journalists regard the phases of intense abuse as extraordinarily invasive, especially when the possibility of avoiding it is limited because the abuse comes via private message or Twitter, or because the newsroom and community engagement department are not separated, meaning that the journalists are forced to read all of the comments on their articles or on those of their colleagues. In addition, the journalists perceive attacks on the subjects of stories as attacks on themselves.

3.6. How do individual journalists deal with the abuse?

Most of the interviewed journalists feel the need to "communicate" in one way or other posts they perceive as particularly bad. Many read posts aloud to one other in the newsroom. Some publish screenshots of particularly extreme instances of abuse on their private profiles or thematise them in their journalistic work. The journalists see gestures of solidarity positively, regardless of whether they are expressed on a journalist's profile or as a comment below an article. It is noteworthy that many of the journalists limit their presence on social media as the attacks become more frequent and regular.

Many journalists admit that they react only sparingly to online abuse, if at all. Only a minority of them established contact with the authors of the abusive posts. The readiness to report abuse to the police is not very pronounced in Austria. Some journalists report cases relatively quickly. Others are for personal or practical reasons (lack of time, no expectation of success) more restrained. The support of the authorities is perceived differently among journalists. While prominent

journalists say the police respond relatively quickly to reports of abuse, there are also numerous cases where young and less well-known journalists (especially women) had to wait a long time for a reaction by the authorities.

3.7. What measures are media outlets taking?

In recent years, media outlets have developed methods for dealing with concrete abuse and the abstract danger it poses. These methods vary according to the size and affiliation of the media outlet, the composition of its audience and the resources used. Media outlets have in many cases invested in professional community management. In many areas, formal structures have been developed, e.g., advance notice provided by the newsroom to the community management department when a problematic article goes online. Especially in the case of smaller media outlets, the role of social media support is often the responsibility of the editors themselves, which they often perceive as problematic. In the online newsrooms, the topic is increasingly recognised, but there are often no clearly designated contact persons, procedures or formal support mechanisms.

4. Conclusions

Overall, it can be safely said that the journalists in Austria are strongly affected by online abuse. This abuse is above all politically motivated and very topic-specific. The impact lies in particular with the large number of attacks and within informal methods of "coordination" via social media postings that can be expected to generate abuse among followers. It is also clear that in Austria abuse on Facebook generally takes the form of classic verbal abuse. This becomes apparent when comparing with other countries such as Turkey, where explicit threats of bodily harm play a much bigger role. The extent to which the threats in Austria are communicated through private messages can be determined qualitatively, but is difficult to collate systematically.

From the conversations that were held, the following general recommendations for media outlets and newsrooms can be derived:

4.1. Establishment of a professional community management department separate from the newsroom

Journalists often regard the need to deal with abuse as very stressful, even when it concerns the work of colleagues. They are usually not trained to do so. The bottom line is that journalists, as well as the media outlet and its community, benefit from professional community management. Due to the emotionally charged nature of the work structures should also be in place to protect the psychological well-being of community managers.

4.2. Address the problem internally

Affected journalists report that solidarity from their employer and colleagues is regarded as very helpful and provides the feeling that they are not alone. However, many journalists, especially in print media, do not address the topic internally. The journalists concerned often feel that their colleagues lack awareness of the problem. Employers and bosses should create an awareness within the company that an attack on one journalist is also an attack on the entire media outlet and the newsroom. In addition, they should make clear that individual members of newsrooms are affected to different degrees. Just because a certain journalist does not receive abuse does not mean his or her colleague at the next desk does not.

4.3. Do not dump the problem on the individual journalist

Each journalist is affected to a different degree by the problem, both in terms of the number of incidences and by how it is personally handled. For some, especially "alpha journalists" in positions of power, online abuse is regarded as a "disturbance." Some even derive satisfaction from it. For others, especially women whose physical integrity is attacked and whose ability to openly pick up the gauntlet is limited, the attacks are very stressful. In general, two journalists can perceive the same attack as invasive to different extents. Those affected reported that they have inhibitions in communicating their problems, and feel under pressure to justify themselves. They feel this would show weakness on their part. Employers should communicate the clearly defined rule that it is the individual journalist who decides what he or she feels to be invasive and threatening.

4.4. Formation of support structures

Most of the affected journalists build informal networks in the newsrooms, meaning they read aloud to one another particularly bad posts or messages or publish them on their personal social media profiles. However, there is hardly any institutional support in the newsrooms, i.e., clearly designated contact persons that one can turn to in the event of a problem, or supervision programmes that can be used by those concerned. Editors should develop guidelines on how to communicate the problem in advance, how to protect journalists and how to help them work through the problem. These guidelines and the contact persons should be communicated openly.

5. Annex

5.1. Austrian media use range of tools to fight online abuse

Author: IPI Contributor Jonas Vogt, IPI Staff. Published: Apr. 10, 2017.

While the topic of online abuse – against journalists, but also against third parties – may have gained increased media attention in 2016, Austrian media outlets have struggled with the problem for some time now.

In recent years, all media outlets with a digital presence have had to think about how they deal with these challenges. In addition to moral considerations, such as protection of employees and third parties, and legal responsibilities – according to Austria's media law, media outlets are responsible for comments posted on their platforms – there are also practical considerations. For journalists, especially women journalists, but also community managers, online abuse poses an additional psychological burden that can have a negative impact on their life and work.

As do individual journalists, media outlets have methods for dealing with concrete abuses and the abstract danger they pose. IPI spoke with selected large and small media outlets in Austria about how they organise their community management, what structures they are building and how they assess the challenge overall.

Responses varied with the size, affiliation and composition of the audience and the resources used. However, three points of commonality were noted.

In the first place, editors – but also the executive floor and community managers – know by now which topics will elicit a strong response in the form of problematic comments. The issue of refugees in particular has been the source of much of the abuse during the past one-and-a-half to two years. There is much overlap in terms of how media outlets cover controversial issues, although affiliation and audience also play a role.

"In our case, Islam is an extremely emotionally charged topic," Aleksandra Tulej of Biber, a magazine geared toward immigrants to Austria, notes.

An additional observation is that the targeting of journalists is not random: certain writers are singled out.

"We have about three or four journalists who are attacked, especially in the comment sections," Stefan Kaltenbrunner, editor-in-chief of kurier.at, the online version of the daily Kurier, says.

Christian Burger, community manager for the daily Der Standard, offers a similar view, adding: "Often, something a journalist wrote will be held against him for years."

A final point that became apparent in the conversations is that editorial decisions often play a role in terms of the form that the abuse takes. The more prominently an author is represented, the higher the chance that he or she will be attacked personally. In cases where the editorial board appears as the author or where the authorship is not prominently displayed, the attacks become more general.

"In our case, few individual journalists are attacked, but rather the medium as a whole," Clemens Pilz, head of community management at heute.at, the digital edition of a popular free daily tabloid, observes. Increasingly, the entire industry is being attacked under catchphrases such as "Lügenpresse" ("lying press").

Measures

All of this is not entirely new. In the last few years, Austrian media outlets have gathered a set of lessons learned to deal with the challenges as best they can. Several of these are described in general terms here.

First, professional community management is not a cure-all, but it does help. Der Standard and its User-Generated Content Team of nine people – which deals not only with forum support, but also with guest comments by users – is a pioneer in Austria and a reflection of forum size and resources at the paper. At heute.at, three employees are responsible for community management. But most other outlets are also in the process of professionalising their relevant departments or have already done so.

Still, community management is an expensive investment and media outlets can only make available a limited amount of resources. "It's a question of manpower, of course," Kaltenbrunner says.

At heute.at and kurier.at, editors take on community management tasks in the off-peak hours, which means that they are unavailable for other duties. Smaller media outlets such as Biber often do not have sufficient resources to allow a staff member to dedicate his or her time solely to this task.

Second, structures can help. If journalists and department heads know in advance which articles are problematic, and if they are in close exchange with community management, then they can better prepare themselves for a potential wave of comments. Such a communication system is already in place at larger media outlets. Communication is less systematic at smaller ones, but because of the shorter distances between offices, staff are usually well aware of what could happen. Overall, structurally planned procedures make it less likely that media outlets will be "surprised" by waves of abusive comments.

Third, discussions can be controlled to a certain degree through intervention. At Der Standard, editors are encouraged to take part in the discussion forums. Other

media outlets are following suit. A dual strategy lies behind this move.

"This way we demonstrate to our users that we appreciate their opinion," Burger says. But it is also a way of letting users know that the outlet is keeping an eye on the forums and that no one there is acting unobserved.

Fourth, there are – in addition to manual intervention – technology-based solutions available. Filtering software that filters out posts containing certain words for manual review is used in almost all major media outlets. At kurier.at, the forums are generally closed between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., when no community management takes place. At Der Standard, technical considerations go further still.

"Up until now we put considerable energy into making the small, destructive part of our community less visible," Burger says. "Now we want to concentrate on highlighting the much larger, constructive part."

One problem with this technical oversight is that it can only be applied to the media outlet's website. The more the discussions move away from comment sections and onto social networks, the less control media outlets have over them. On Facebook, comments can only be deleted or hidden after they have been posted, thus requiring intensive live monitoring.

Fifth, it is important not to leave employees alone with the problem. This applies not only to journalists – who are naturally at the centre of attention because they put their name on critical stories – but also to community managers themselves. There are many reports of individual managers who are not able to withstand the pressure and decide to leave the company.

"The entire industry must learn to communicate directly with the community managers and the social media managers and not leave them alone with what they do all day," Kaltenbrunner says. This, he notes, is a big task that still lies ahead of everyone.

As is the case with the journalists concerned, community managers usually try to help one another informally, for example, by exchanging views on particularly bad postings. Formal structures and means of communication are generally still lacking in most media outlets. This is, of course, not only a question of will, but also of resources. All in all, structures for formal support are still underdeveloped in the Austrian media.

Sixth, there are points at which even the best technical and legal measures can no longer help.

"At kurier.at, we have a relatively strict registration procedure with telephone numbers," Kaltenbrunner says. But he suggests that a certain amount of abuse cannot be prevented and does not even believe that stricter laws would help.

"For three-quarters of a year now, we have been reporting everything that is even remotely illegal," he told IPI in an interview in December. "We have now reported

some 40 to 50 comments to the public prosecutor. But you can't prevent everything."

At the same time, reports of responses to online attacks give rise to the impression that authorities do not react to all cases with equal speed. While prominent journalists such as Florian Klenk or Christa Zöchling have highlighted very quick responses by authorities in their cases, Tulej, from Biber, tells a different story. She says that after she reported one person who repeatedly insulted and threatened her via various channels, she received no reaction from the authorities for a lengthy period of time.

Conclusion

The Austrian media have improved in the area of combating online abuse over the past months and years. Newsrooms have increasingly recognised the problem and have become – perhaps because of the increased attention the issue has received – better able to impress upon senior management the urgency of the matter.

Nevertheless, much needs to be done. Those in positions of responsibility are largely aware of this.

"We still have massive potential for improvement in all aspects," Kaltenbrunner says, speaking for the entire industry.

Especially in small media outlets, editors have to rely on informal measures, not because the will is not there, but because the resources are not. Even within the larger media outlets, there is a lack of formal structures to deal with the problem. Lastly, the increasing importance of Facebook adds a new dimension of difficulty, as media outlets' internal technical solutions do not apply to external platforms. Journalists often regard the need to deal with abuse as very stressful, even when it concerns the work of colleagues. They are usually not trained to do so. The bottom line is that journalists, as well as the media outlet and its community, benefit from professional community management. Due to the emotionally charged nature of the work structures should also be in place to protect the psychological well-being of community managers.

5.2. Amid Austria election, party's online posts draw abuse of journalists

Author: IPI Contributor Jonas Vogt, IPI Staff. Published: Dec. 2, 2016.

As Austria heads into the final days before a Dec. 4 presidential election, one contender's backers increasingly face accusations of encouraging the online abuse of journalists.

The allegation comes amid an election that has hardly been routine: candidates from Austria's two traditionally strongest parties failed to make it past the first round in April, leaving one nominally independent candidate to face off against a candidatefrom the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

The independent, Alexander Van der Bellen, a former Green Party leader, narrowly defeated the FPÖ's Norbert Hofer in May, but the result was annulled due to irregularities and an Oct. 2 repeat election was postponed over technical problems with ballot envelopes.

Now, as the decisive contest between the two finally looms, critics say the FPÖ has used its strong social media brand to promote abuse targeting journalists perceived to be its critics, in behaviour ranging from innocuous insults to implied, and sometimes outright, threats.

In order to examine those accusations, the International Press Institute (IPI) conducted a case study of major FPÖ social media accounts in early September and mid-October 2016. It found that even when FPÖ figures engaged in criticism of journalists that could be regarded as full within the bounds of free speech, albeit sometimes unfair or impolite, those statements often ignited a vitriolic reaction by party supporters against the journalists.

The FPÖ's digital communication strategy is generally regarded as the best among Austrian political parties. In the last few years, the party has built strong brands on social networks to deliver its message to the public without filters. Four of the top 10 politicians with larger social media presence in Austria belong to the FPÖ, according to Politometer.at, which ranks the social media presence of the country's politicians.

However, FPÖ politicians use social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook not only to disseminate links, videos or live streams, but also to criticise political opponents and others who are not part of the immediate political arena, including journalists.

The party leaders sell themselves as the underdogs, and the FPÖ as a party seeking to fight the system. The relationship between the FPÖ and professional journalists is tense, but also ambivalent: FPÖ politicians take part in TV discussions hosted by

national public service broadcaster ORF and private channels, and give interviews to most print and online media.

Afterward, they post the interviews on their social media accounts, primarily on their official Facebook channels. In some cases they post critical comments singling out the journalist who interviewed them, implicitly equating the journalists with the very same "system" the FPÖ says it is fighting and labelling mainstream media or critical news outlets "Systemmedien" (media that are part of the "system").

By comparison, Austria's two major parties – the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) – also criticise the media publicly. But that criticism is usually less aggressive and less personalised, and observers say those parties' supporters' real efforts to influence the media take place over thetelephone.

The case study

IPI's research focused on the Facebook page of FPÖ chairman Heinz-Christian Strache. This page plays a central role, as it is used to share important posts from other FPÖ pages, increasing their reach. As of the end of October 2016, Strache's verified page had more than 430,000 fans, more than five times as many as the official FPÖ fanpage, with more than 78,000 fans.

Attempting to draw a line between legitimate criticism and abuse, the study closely examined 10 Facebook posts from "HC Strache", as he is commonly known, that singled out journalists for criticism. The study did not examine abuse directed at social media activity not directly related to the journalists' work.

In total, the case study identified 92comments on the 10 posts on Strache's Facebook page during the period in question that contained insults or threats to journalists. As noted, this figure could be higher, particularly as it is unclear whether any comments were deleted.

The study determined that six of the comments constituted "implicit or explicit threats of violence" that could result in a criminal investigation if a complaint were made to police. The other 86 comments were determined to constitute "abusive behaviour", i.e., essentially offensive remarks directed against a person or their physical appearance.

IPI sought comment from the FPÖ about these comments, but the party declined to answer.

Comments below the posts on Strache's page tended to focus on allegations of the media's being biased, part of the "system" or openly hostile toward the FPÖ. This narrative was also found repeatedly in the posts themselves ("Armin Wolf, as a 'journalist', pursues policy against the FPÖ").

The comments ranged from explicit and implied threats ("Ms. [Ingrid] Thurnher will one day be presented with the bill", "remember that face, impress it in your

memory", "we know where they belong … 'crimes against one's own people' should be rigorously punished in Europe"), to simple, if boorish, insults to mental capacity("How can this dimwit demand an independent ORF?", "He's a case for the psychiatrist", "She will soon need the attention of a medical specialist") and appearance ("Has she ever taken a look in the mirror? She's ugly as hell").

As for the 10 posts – which were often also shared by other, far-reaching FPÖ-linked pages– they ranged from sharing an article of the FPÖ-linked page Unzensuriert ("[Florian] Klenk and Wolf: Leftist journalists drive constitutional court judge toward self-demolition") to targeted criticism of a specific journalist ("…more than unworthy and completely unacceptable"). In some instances, the posts themselves were not overtly critical; a post containing an interview presented on a television program was enough to draw abusive comments against the journalists involved.

A clear gender component was also strikingly evident. While the majority of the 10 posts on Strache's page singled out male journalists, the posts targeting female journalists drew a much greater number of negative comments: 75 of the 92 examined, including six comments deemed threats and 69 comments deemed abuse. Whereas comments targeting male journalists tended to criticise their work and question their independence, comments against female journalists were more likely to refer to appearance ("I don't even look at the woman any more, I'm so nauseated"), or contain sexual-related insults ("I don't like the bitch, she's just disrespectful") or threats of physical violence.

In one case, the FPÖ cut together old footage from ORF programs such as "Im Zentrum" or "Runder Tisch" to produce a misleading videoalleging to show journalist Ingrid Thurnher making unfavourable facial expressions in reaction to comments by FPÖ politicians, and shared it under the title "A look says more than a thousand words". The video evoked a strong response from commenters on Strache's Facebook page, exposing Thurnher to intensely negative reactions.

The impact on the journalists

Many of the journalists targeted said they do not follow Strache's Facebook page carefully and only learn about his posts indirectly.

"I only become aware of them when numerous similar-sounding comments suddenly appear on my Facebook page, often under totally un-related posts of mine,"ORF prime time newsanchor Armin Wolftold IPI in an interview.

Wolf said that although he briefly looks to see what post Strache dedicated to him, he does not read the comments on Strache's page, explaining: "I don't expect to find much constructive criticism there."

Florian Klenk, editor-in-chief of weekly news magazine Falter, confirmed that he took a somewhat similar approach.

"I notice that I'm being discussed somewhere on a right-wing page when the e-mails swell up," he said. Klenk noted that while he sometimes looks for the source,

sometimes he simply does not care.

"It's basically childish,"he said. "Strache and [FPÖ member, Vienna vice-mayor Johann] Guldens are making noise in their own echo chamber. They're yelling around in a digital cellar. Sometimes the door opens and something seeps out."

Klenk added that he does not need to visit this cellar every week.

At least in this study, the phase of intense hatred following Strache's posts usually lasted only briefly. Nevertheless, the journalists targeted described the phenomenon as being extraordinarily invasive and said that it ranged from "annoying" and "burdensome", to "frightening". In one case, a journalist who declined to be named in this article was offered, but declined to accept, police protection.

But even in cases that appear milder, the proliferation of such comments carries the possibility that journalists will withdraw from certain platforms and no longer reach certain audiences, if not from fear of actual violence, then because dealing with them is so time-consuming and nerve-wracking.

"Because of such experiences, I am rarely or hardly ever active in the social networks," Christa Zöchling, a journalist for Profil, observed.

5.3. Five female Austrian journalists on online abuse

Author: IPI Contributor Jonas Vogt. Published: Oct. 5, 2016.

Women experience online abuse differently – and to a different degree. The same goes for female journalists. As part of the International Press Institute (IPI)'s OnTheLine programme, we met five young women who work as journalists in Austria and spoke to them about their experience with online comments and postings that go beyond content-based criticism.

The journalists who shared their views with us are: Verena Bogner (Broadly, Vice News' women's interest news site), Teresa Havlicek (Wienerin, a women's lifestyle magazine), Solmaz Khorsand (the daily Wiener Zeitung), Oona Kroisleitner (the daily Der Standard) and freelancer Olja Alvir.

Two conclusions formed a common thread through all of our conversations: first, the abuse is extraordinarily invasive, particularly when it reaches journalists unfiltered via social media; and second, the quantity and nature of the abuse depends strongly on the issue being covered. All of the journalists we interviewed stated that they could tell in advance whether an article would be particularly controversial and give rise to a large number of comments and postings.

Two issues in particular are said to trigger intense responses from readers: refugees and feminism. Or, as Bogner puts it, anything that is "about women and where a woman dares to make use of her right to have an opinion".

Links between refugee issues and feminist-related topics are seen as particularly sensitive. Reporting on discrimination against women, or even simply stating that phenomena such as forced migration impacts women differently, provokes strong emotions. The journalists we interviewed said the intensity of these emotional responses had grown during the refugee crisis and the Austrian presidential election campaign.

Different media, different modes

The nature of the abuse varies according to the medium and the audience. In reader letters or in the forums on Derstandard.at, the online edition of the daily Der Standard, the abuse takes on a personal quality, but comments forego swear words or threats.

"Readers will ask whether I'm a spoiled brat, and if that's the reason I engage with such problems," Kroisleitner observes.

Or the comments employ codes. Feminists are quickly accused of being "frustrated", which is usually a reference to sexual frustration. The women we interviewed also reported that certain readers continually make reference to their (presumed or

real) immigrant background or to other things from their past that, in these readers' view, prevent them from reporting objectively on a certain issue.

The degree of abuse is also said to depend on readers' knowledge about the author. If a photo next to an article shows that the author is a young woman, the comments are different and head quickly in the direction "bimbo" or "little girl".

But on social media such as Twitter and Facebook, users hold little back.

"I sometimes get the feeling that Facebook users are egging one another on," Bogner says.

Here, the spectrum of abuse ranges from denying the journalist's competence or criticising her appearance, all the way to "Go die, you whore".

Implied threats such as "You should be raped by a refugee" commonly follow coverage of refugee issues, as do comments suggesting that women will "get what comes to them". Implied threats that make use of the conditional are particularly difficult to deal with because they often do not disappear from social media, even after being reported.

Impact of 'new audiences'

Comments or postings in response to issues such as refugees and right-wing politics become especially intense when the articles in question acquire a reach beyond their usual audience or are highlighted in forums or media outlets that belong to the right-wing scene. The website Unzensuriert.at ("Uncensored"), which is considered close to the far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) party, is frequently mentioned in this context.

When Wienerin covered FPÖ presidential candidate Norbert Hofer's position on abortion, Unzensuriert wrote an article with the title "Hysterical women's magazine launches counterattack on Hofer".

"A huge wave of abused followed," Havlicek recounts. "Especially from men that otherwise never take part in discussion under our articles."

Alvir, too, points to numerous cases in which Unzensuriert wrote about her, which raised the quantity of abuse enormously over the short term.

Always in the background

The abuse is perceived to be especially invasive in the periods after a particularly critical article appears, and becomes even more so when the possibility of avoiding the abuse is limited. This is the case, for example, when the abuse comes via private message or Twitter, or when the newsroom and the community engagement department are not separated, meaning that journalists are forced to read all of the comments on their article or on those of their colleagues. In addition, the journalists perceive attacks on the subjects of stories as attacks on themselves.

The journalists we interviewed say that the online abuse has no direct impact on the choice of topics covered or the coverage itself, at least not in the sense of self-censorship. What emerges instead is a kind of "now more than ever" attitude: the intense comments are taken as proof that it was right to cover the issue in question.

At the same time, the women say, it is difficult to pinpoint possible unconscious self-limitations that may arise.

"The user comments are always there with you in the background," Havlicek reflects. "So you at least think for a lot longer about certain phrasings."

Dealing with the challenge

Among the journalists we interviewed, there are differences not only in terms of how strongly the abuse is felt, but also in terms of the mechanisms used to deal with it.

"There is no 'right way' to deal with abuse," Alvir says.

The women agree that it is not possible to give advice that works in every situation, not only because each person is different, but also because each incidence of online outrage has its own dynamic.

All of them say the first people to whom they turn are colleagues, especially those who have suffered similar problems. Dealing openly with the issue in the newsroom can help keep the abuse from getting to one too much, they suggest.

They frequently highlight as a positive the possibility to avoid engaging with the extreme negative reactions to one's own work. In the analogue world, secretaries and management departments filter out the worst of readers' letters. Similar possibilities can be found in the digital world. At derstandard.at, journalists have the possibility to read postings (including those that haven't even been published), but aren't required to do so.

One problem, the women say, is that although there are mechanisms to shield journalists from abuse in advance – which vary according to the size of the media outlet and its understanding of the problem – there is usually no central contact point that communicates openly and acts as a switchboard in case there are problems with online abuse.

Several of the journalists we interviewed have had good experiences with confronting the abuse on their own. They publish screenshots of particularly extreme instances of abuse on their private profiles, both to raise awareness of the problem and to get rid of a certain emotional burden.

"There's a certain relief there," Bogner explains. "I wouldn't call it gratifying, but it does leave you feeling somewhat satisfied."

Alvir, too, says that she previously made her audience aware of particularly bad abuse on Twitter and called for it to be reported.

The journalists see small gestures of solidarity and encouragement positively, regardless of whether they are expressed on the journalist's profile or underneath an article.

Notably, many of the women have limited their presence on social media in various ways. Olja Alvir hasn't had a private Facebook profile in years and has changed her settings on Twitter so that she only sees comments from people whom she also follows.

"At some point it became too much for me," she says. "I didn't want the toxic influence on my everyday life anymore."

Teresa Havlicek consciously stays away to a large extent from Twitter and Oona Kroisleitner has changed her Facebook settings so that fewer and fewer postings reach her from people who are not her friends.

These measures are partly seen as self-empowerment, but they have the disadvantage that certain voices in parts of the debate either aren't heard anymore, or are heard more quietly.

Translated from the German by Scott Griffen.

IPI: Protecting Press Freedom For More Than 60 Years

The Vienna-based IPI is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists dedicated to furthering and safeguarding press freedom, promoting the free flow of news and information, and improving the practices of journalism. Formed in 1950 by 34 leading editors from 15 countries on the belief that a free press would contribute to the creation of a better world, IPI today includes members in more than 100 countries and holds consultative status with the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

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