

Social media and online hostility:

Experiences of women in Irish journalism

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IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
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“I would definitely be one of those people who shies away from speaking about stuff or expressing an opinion because of the vitriol that’s out there. You’ve seen it against other journalists, male and female, and you just don’t want to bring that on yourself. Because it’s just a whole other aspect of your work now that becomes very stressful and very tiring and time consuming, that you just can’t devote yourself to. So you let a lot of stuff slide, and just don’t comment and don’t say an awful lot. There are some brilliant women out there who do and brave it and stick to their guns and say what they want to say. And they’re doing it for the rest of us I suppose, who don’t have the time or the energy or the will to get into these battles.”

- One of the journalists interviewed for this project

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Many of the participants' contributions were challenging to listen to and read through, showcasing some of the very worst aspects of contemporary online culture. Nevertheless, it is essential that this aspect of journalists' lives is documented, analysed, and shared, in their own words, as is the primary aim of this report. Thank you for your contributions.

Dawn Wheatley
May 2023

// EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The public's increased access to journalists via social networks is arguably the defining shift in audience-media relations over the past two decades. While some laud this potential for dialogue, the reality is that many journalists face targeted hostility, with women often subjected to particularly challenging content. Underpinning this project is the question of how contemporary social media dynamics, and particularly negative or hostile interactions, affect journalists in Ireland. Drawing on interviews with 36 national-level female journalists, this project documents their experiences in their own words, analyses how they handle negativity, and explores how they think those with power should respond. The project also includes focus groups with 40 student journalists who are grappling with the expectations around social media use moving forward in their careers. The main findings include:

- There are a wide array of reasons why **social media is an essential part of most journalists' day-to-day work**: it is used to observe people's stories and gauge public opinion, it functions as a practical tool during the reporting process, and it facilitates the promotion of their own work and organisation. Most reporters felt they could not do their job without it, so could not simply disconnect if experiencing problems online.
- Most journalists have **internalised the pressure to be active online** and believe that having some kind of social media presence will help them to build their professional profile, generate more opportunities, and ultimately increase their "employability". Many felt that most managers and editors are placing increased value on having a visible, dynamic individual online presence – but one which will not be *too* personal, opinionated, or controversial and risk bringing reputational damage to the organisation.
- The negative experiences that journalists have encountered are positioned on a spectrum that ranges from minor nit-picking and critiquing of their work, to sexualised comments, to more outright threats and concerns for their physical safety when online harassment crosses into "real life". This report suggests **15 types of online hostility that women journalists in Ireland encounter**.
- The journalists' experiences **varied depending on the particulars of their work**, and their years in the industry. Broadcasters attracted continuous negative attention, while those most vocal online also garner heavy criticism. Journalists who report on certain topics, such as politics or social justice, also face heightened reactions. Those who were more experienced often acknowledged the landscape was tougher for younger reporters.
- Journalists acknowledge that male colleagues are not free of criticism and are also targeted because of broader dislike and scepticism towards journalists. Nevertheless, most also identified **particular gendered insults and threats**, whether related to their appearance, attempts to discredit their expertise or professionalism, or comments that included outrightly sexual undertones.
- Many journalists **downplayed their negative experiences**, suggesting it was simply part of the role and it did not really impact them once they learned to deal with it; however, concurrently, many also acknowledged that social media interactions were among the worst aspects of their job and they had experienced difficult encounters which had been upsetting, irritating, caused them to worry, or made them feel at physical risk.

- Some had **particular moments or incidents which caused them to re-evaluate** their interactions with the public online. This report proposes five “phases” which many journalists fit in with regarding social media usage, ranging from enthusiasm early in their career to feeling fatigued, self-censoring, and withdrawing as a form of self-preservation and to minimise the negatives or likelihood of a backlash.
- Journalists’ usage of social media platforms, and what they share, have broadly **declined over time, and the past five years especially**. Some recalled an era when Twitter in particular was a positive, fun social space, especially as an Irish journalist. However, its shift in recent years has been associated with a general anti-journalist sentiment, with some participants suggesting that it reached a low point during Covid-19.
- The attitudes towards **filtering interactions** – such as blocking or having direct messages (DMs) open/closed – varied. Some had no problem actively removing and excluding people who were threatening, overly personal or heavily critical, citing the importance of personal boundaries. Others were concerned about how it was perceived if journalists appeared to be too quick to exclude people from seeing or contacting them.
- Despite any negative experiences, journalists broadly remained committed to their choice of career and any problems with social media were **not enough to deter them from working in journalism**. Many made the point that social media is simply one aspect of their job, and does not define their role or their professional identity.
- Social media companies were highlighted as the **institutions with the most power to improve the landscape** for journalists, with calls for them to act more responsibly and efficiently in preventing and removing offensive, misleading or defamatory content. Legislators were encouraged to apply more pressure on these organisations, especially given the companies’ strong presence in Dublin.
- Employers were also encouraged to be pro-active and prepare staff for negativity online, ensuring clear support and pathways are in place in newsrooms when issues arise. Blurred boundaries around **working conditions** were also a concern, such as many journalists feeling an inability to “switch off”, and engaging with the public outside their working hours. Questions were also raised about the actual contractual obligations on journalists to use social media, and how the additional labour should be recognised.
- **Journalism students are anxious and concerned** about many aspects of social media, and some have already encountered criticism about their career choice. They are worried about what is “acceptable” to post about in the eyes of employers, while they also feel pressure to be active. Like their established counterparts, they have witnessed some of the relentless, abusive targeting of high-profile journalists who have been vocal and visible online. They are also seeking advice and guidance on the best ways to use social media to their advantage while avoiding being targeted.

Overall, the report raises concerns about the pressure that journalists face, regardless of whether they are established or early in their career. The findings become particularly important when contextualised against the backdrop of precarious working conditions and the economic landscape of news producers in Ireland. Questions arise around what is now most valued in newsrooms, what additional burdens are built into journalistic work, and where journalists who do not prioritise social media find themselves in terms of recruitment and career progression. This is particularly concerning for younger women, as they try to balance professional ambitions with building a career on their own terms, with clear personal/professional boundaries in place.

// 1. INTRODUCTION

Journalists' work lies at the core of any democratic society, whereby they function as the messenger and information gatekeeper, moving between the public and the state actors and institutions which shape the policies impacting on citizens' lives. Historically, though, that work has been perceived as primarily a man's job, situated in male-dominated spaces: former *Irish Times* editor Geraldine Kennedy observed how, in the late 1960s, she joined the organisation as a junior reporter and was "the only woman in the newsroom at the time"¹. Of course, many aspects of Irish society have since evolved: data gathered in 1997 suggested that by then, 30% of journalists were women², increasing to 38% in 2015³. A progressive trajectory may seem clear, yet any belief that gender equality in journalism is resolved or inevitable is far from true. Analysis of news coverage in 2020 found that, in Ireland, women accounted for just 28% of news subjects/sources and 37% of identifiable journalists, in line with international averages.⁴ We know that it is not that women and girls do not *want* to become journalists or struggle to access training/education courses, as there are high levels of female students/graduates both at EU level⁵ and within Ireland⁶. Instead, as young women enter the workforce, other factors come into play which may act as deterrents, such as precarious working conditions (later tied to poor supports such as maternity leave), demanding hours, or – as this report explores – hostile criticisms of themselves and their work which can often be particularly gendered.

Public anger and reaction towards journalists and the work they do is not a new phenomenon of course, and phone calls or letters were the traditional route for frustrated publics to vent. The wave of progressive, feminist print journalism on the "women's pages" in Ireland in the 1970s led to criticism and "predictably, the letters of complaint flooded their desks"¹; a reader once accused the journalists and editors of "brainwashing married women to have careers outside the home" and of pressing for changes to contraceptive laws "directly contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church"⁷. These might seem like insults of a bygone era, but misogynistic attacks and criticism have been granted new life on online platforms, with women and girls more widely impacted across a range of indicators.⁸

1.1 Familiar challenge meets the digital age

Almost 30 years ago, two key goals were identified at the landmark UN Commission on the Status of Women conference in Beijing in 1995: (i) increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making using media and new technologies of communication, and (ii) promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. However, social media would bring hurdles to these goals which could scarcely be imagined back in 1995. Since then, the

¹ O'Brien, A., 2017. "A fine old time": feminist print journalism in the 1970s. *Irish Studies Review*, 25(1), pp.42-55.

² Corcoran, M.P., 2004. The political preferences and value orientations of Irish journalists. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 13(2), pp.23-42.

³ Rafter, K. and Dunne, S., 2016. The Irish Journalist Today.

⁴ Wheatley, D. 2021. Global Media Monitoring Project 2020: Ireland report. Available at: <https://doras.dcu.ie/26486/>.

⁵ European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector in the EU (2017/2210(INI))

Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0101_EN.pdf, Section J.

⁶ Wheatley, D. 2021. Diversity in Irish Media, in *DCU School of Communications Submission to the Future of Media Commission*.

Available at: www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/2021-05/dcu-submission-final.pdf.

⁷ O'Brien, M. 2015. 'Facile ignorance' and 'wild wild women': religion, journalism and social change in Ireland 1961–1979.

Available at <https://doras.dcu.ie/24057/>.

⁸ Park, K., Ging, D., Murphy, S., & McGrath, C. 2023. The impact of the use of social media on women and girls. Study requested by European Parliament FEMM committee. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU\(2023\)743341](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2023)743341).

2018 European Parliament resolution on gender equality in the EU media sector noted that “women engaging in social media are encountering increasing levels of harassment; this harassment has the potential to silence women’s voices and weakens their participation in society”. It also stated that women are still less visible on certain reporting beats like sport, politics, and the economy, but highlighted that equal female participation “is crucial not only for reasons of representation but also for reasons of equal opportunities and the full recognition of their expertise and knowledge”⁹. An added dimension for journalists is the perceived pressure to be active and visible online, in a journalistic landscape where online engagement and metrics are often key drivers. Journalists who can build up their own profile and be more visible may be more desirable for managers – but this increased exposure can make them more vulnerable. Add to this the expectations of an increasingly visual world online whereby video and images, with a personable and engaging journalist to the fore, may become the priority for some outlets depending on their strategies and targets.

The ease with which journalists are now identifiable and directly contactable means hundreds of messages/comments can land on their personal devices within minutes of the publication of a story or social media post, regardless of whether they are “at work”. The instantaneous nature of online reactions means there is no in-built “cooling-down period” which, in the past, frustrated letter writers faced. Over the past decade and a half, this accessibility of journalists through social media platforms has been the most significant change in audience interaction. Many welcome this and the democratic opportunities for dialogue, of which there are plenty of positive opportunities. Nevertheless, the majority of journalists encounter animosity online, with women frequently exposed to especially difficult material, and leading to a growing layer of “emotional labour”¹⁰ with which women journalists navigating online spaces must now manage.

1.2 Recent research & project aims

The subject of online harassment and targeting of journalists is topical and increasingly well-researched in terms of surveys. Some recent findings include:

- 73% of women journalists from 125 countries said they experienced “online violence” at work, according to a 2020 survey by Unesco/International Center for Journalists; 30% said they self-censored on social media, and 20% had withdrawn from all online interaction.¹¹
- A 2022 UK survey found that almost half of women journalists said they promoted their work less online to minimise the risk it could attract, and almost one in five (18%) said the negativity they encountered had made them consider leaving the media industry altogether. Overall, three-quarters had been threatened or felt unsafe.¹²
- A 2020 National Union of Journalists survey (of male and female journalists) in the UK found that **78% of journalists agreed that harassment is “normalised and seen as part of the job”**, with half (51%) experiencing online abuse in the past year.¹³

The challenge and patterns are clear, and while quantifying experiences is valuable to establish the magnitude, there is also merit to in-depth contributions from journalists, in their own words. This report, therefore, functions to capture and validate the experiences of Irish journalists, and to explore the practicalities of how they grapple with these challenges.

⁹ See Footnote 5, point P/Q.

¹⁰ Miller, K.C. and Lewis, S.C., 2022. *Journalists, harassment, and emotional labor: The case of women in on-air roles at US local television stations*. *Journalism*, 23(1), pp.79-97.

¹¹ Posetti, J., Aboulez, N., Bontcheva, K., Harrison, J., Waisbord, S. 2020. *Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>.

¹² Women in Journalism & Reach plc. 2023. *Online harms against women working in journalism and media: Research report 2023*. Available at <https://womeninjournalism.co.uk/research-report-2023-online-harms-against-women-working-in-journalism-and-media/>.

¹³ NUJ Members’ Safety Survey. 2020. Available at: <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-safety-report-2020.html>.

The project has four key aims:

1. To document how women journalists in Ireland experience hostility and negativity online.
2. To understand what tools they use to navigate digital spaces and manage unwanted interactions, and discover why they use them.
3. To explore what policies the journalists believe could be enacted by newsroom managers, legislators and social media companies to tackle the problems.
4. To analyse the implications of these experiences for women's visibility in journalism and for the participants' willingness to stay in the sector.

A second component focuses on student journalists to better understand how they interpret the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead in terms of social media and their journalistic careers.

In Ireland, **some cases of online harassment have received attention**, such as a 2019 conviction for one man's targeting of multiple women journalists¹⁴, a commentator being exposed as the man behind a fake account that targeted female journalists¹⁵, and a teenager convicted of his sustained harassment of a journalist¹⁶. These are among the few that ever enter public discourse, but there is also something more underlying and pervasive happening day-to-day for many journalists which is important to document.

What emerges in this report are instances of extremely worrying conduct from some members of the public and journalists feeling genuinely at risk, but the most extreme anecdotes are, thankfully, relatively rare. Despite this, there is a substantial collection of experiences gathered here that is still highly concerning. Most journalists had normalised much of the negativity, instead reframing it as irritating or frustrating, occasionally upsetting, and something that might come in "waves" depending on certain stories they had published. Yet most refused to see themselves as victims, even if they described troubling experiences. Nevertheless, a previous study into women journalists' experiences highlighted how it is often "constant moderate-low volume abuse and harassment that burns slowly but can be cumulatively devastating"¹²; this chimes with the accounts in this report which raise questions about whether many women will ultimately choose to withdraw from the journalistic environment because of the relentless hostility they face.

1.3 Structure of the report

After outlining the study's methodology, the Findings are based around five sections:

- Understanding the reasons why journalists are active, including both the positive features of social media and the perceived professional obligations.
- Documenting the journalists' experiences of negativity and the forms it takes.
- Understanding how journalists deal with the negativity, including through filtering practices and sometimes disengaging with social media.
- What actions can be taken by employers, legislators, and social media companies.
- Findings from the student focus groups that tie in with the reports' main themes.

Finally, it is worth noting that throughout the report, the expressions "hostility" and "negativity" are used as catch-all terms, as some language used by other researchers such as "digital violence", "online harms" or "online abuse" did not accurately capture all of what the journalists described, nor how they interpreted their own experiences.

¹⁴ McLean, S., & Hoban, B. 2019. *Man who harassed six female writers and journalists online is jailed*. Available at: www.irishtimes.com/-1.4083166

¹⁵ O Faolain, Aodhan. 2021. *Journalists seek details of Twitter account holders*. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/-1.4565486>.

¹⁶ BBC News. 2022. *Teenage boy sentenced after harassing BBC reporter*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-60420263>

// 2. METHODOLOGY

Interviews

Thirty-six journalists were interviewed: all were women, and they came from national publications including RTÉ, Virgin Media, BBC Northern Ireland, The Irish Times, the Irish Independent, TheJournal.ie, The Irish Daily Mail/Irish Mail on Sunday, the Irish Examiner, the Irish Mirror, The Times Ireland/Sunday Times, and the Sunday World. Freelance journalists, and those working with two smaller outlets not named to protect participants' identities, also contributed. All were reporters or had recent reporting/editorial experience.

Participants were recruited on a rolling basis to ensure a mix of experiences, ages, and social media use. Overall, 80 journalists from the Republic and Northern Ireland were contacted via email and 36 participated¹⁷. The interviews, conducted by a project research assistant, took place on Zoom or via phone and lasted between 25-45 minutes. They were semi-structured, meaning the conversations followed the same general outline but the questioning and conversation was flexible and adapted to the individual journalists' experiences and points that they raised. The interviews were conducted between April–August 2022, then transcribed and analysed.

Focus groups

In March 2022, 40 journalism students took part in five focus groups. The students, 20 male and 20 female, were from a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate journalism programmes in Dublin City University, University of Limerick, and National University of Ireland, Galway. Each focus group lasted between 40-70 minutes.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for the project was granted by the Faculty of Humanities & Social Science Research Ethics Committee in Dublin City University. All participants (36 interviewees and 40 focus group students) were provided with plain-language statements explaining the project, its aims, and what was expected from their involvement, alongside online Informed Consent Forms. All the conversations were recorded but for transcription purposes only.

Guidelines for student journalists

The guidelines, presented at the end of Section 7, originated from the interviews with the 36 journalists. In each interview, the journalist was asked what advice they would have for students/young journalists about how to best navigate social media. Three undergraduate students from DCU's BA Journalism reviewed these responses and collated the list based on what they believed were the most valuable pieces of advice.

Presentation of findings

Participants are anonymised throughout this report and every effort has been made to protect their identity; none of the details or quotations included are attributed to any specific organisation or individual. Some key details which were provided about anecdotes or workplaces have been omitted or paraphrased.

Quotes have been lightly edited for fluency and to remove common traits of speech. When quotes have had any substantial element removed, this is indicated through an ellipsis (...).

¹⁷ It should be noted that the majority of participants are from the Republic of Ireland and the Findings, therefore, do not include an equal geographic balance of contributors.

// 3. WHY BE ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

3.1 The positives

The primary remit of this report is to better understand journalists' experiences with the negative aspects of social media and how it impacts their work, but it is crucial to also document the positive dimensions. Not only does this help to establish a more well-rounded picture of social media's role in journalists' lives, but it gives important context and explains why it is that many journalists are so attached to using social network platforms, refuting any suggestion that they should simply delete their accounts or disengage if it is causing them problems.

The participants explained how social media fit into their daily work and why they are useful. These positives, outlined in Table 1, can be categorised in three ways: (i) social media as a place to observe public discourse and access information; (ii) social media as a practical tool for communication during the reporting process; (iii) social media as a promotional and networking tool. Many were eager to point out the benefits, adamant that the "positives outweigh the negatives", highlighting that it is, overall, an asset to their job. Elsewhere, a minority of journalists reiterated that the majority of interactions they have had with the public online were positive: as one put it, "I've had far more warm, funny, pleasant engagements than I ever have really nasty or abusive engagements", and some really appreciated the genuine positive feedback they received on their stories, explaining how that was "rewarding" and "motivating", encouraging them to keep up what they were doing.

3.2 Professional expectations to be active

Table 1 outlines many of the *practical* uses of social media and how intertwined it now is for many aspects of contemporary reporting, but it is important to also capture the other main reason why some journalists said they are active: the expectation that, as modern journalists, it is simply part of their role. Some noted that Twitter is a valuable industry platform – "in the wider world, it's not particularly important, but I think if you work in media it can be influential" – and there is a professional benefit to being recognisable, and it even functions as a conversation starter at events. Some younger journalists, in particular, reiterated this, suggesting "it looks weird when people aren't on Twitter", or "it feels mandatory within the industry", especially for the advantages it brings for building connections: "Maybe in 10 years' time when I have a great contact list, I won't need it and these people are reaching out to me, but at the moment I am very dependent."

"It is always something in the back of my mind, because it's the first thing you often say to people when you meet them: 'Oh, we haven't met but we follow each other on Twitter.' It is something that I think people in the industry are very aware of"

Many noted some older colleagues who did not use social media much, if at all: some felt there was a slight snobbery around it among more established peers already settled into their careers, while others suggested that older journalists simply did not need it as much "and why would they introduce that into their lives?" On this, some experienced journalists acknowledged that they were not facing the same pressure as younger colleagues, noting how social media is good for visibility to get "established". Another, working for more than 20 years, simply said: "I can get away with not using social media – people who are coming up behind me can't".

TABLE 1: POSITIVE ASPECTS AND BENEFITS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA, ACCORDING TO JOURNALISTS INTERVIEWED

Social media as a place to observe and access information and reaction	Social media as a practical tool for communication during the reporting process	Social media as a promotional and networking tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Understand what is on the public's agenda each day → Get story ideas, eg seeing posts about something that someone experienced → Stay up to date with social trends to shape your work, remain relevant and get to know your audience → Monitor activity of rival journalists/organisations and their outputs → Gauge public reaction to events you're reporting on (eg, red card in a match) → Enjoyable place to be with amusing accounts and commentary on live events → Monitor politicians, celebrities, etc, who make announcements directly on social media → Use it to find out about events (eg, public meetings) which inform on-the-ground reporting → Exposure to diverse perspectives from those outside your social circle → Find discussions about events not widely covered in traditional news formats (eg, certain women's sport) → Familiarise yourself with interests and personality of upcoming interviewees → Monitor Facebook groups that cover your interests (eg, local community groups or hobby groups) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Sharing breaking news → Ease of making contact with sources and contributors to stories → Finding human interest case studies and using #journorequest → Being contacted directly by people with tip-offs and potential stories → Direct interaction with elite sources and staffers, and bypassing secretaries or PR staff → Easily contact overseas experts and international human interest sources on the ground → Use search functions to find people based on their location who can function as witnesses and contributors to stories → Ask for help accessing or understanding something → Document events like press conferences and matches in quick "live update" format → Act as the "middlewoman" asking questions you receive from public (eg, at Covid briefings) → Use the "thread" function and present stories in digestible format → Look up information about individuals involved in stories, often on Facebook or Instagram 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Drive traffic back to your news outlet → Reach new audiences who do not typically consume your organisation's content or brand at all → Promote and showcase work you have done → Get praise and positive feedback on your work and see its impact on audiences → Respond to audience queries and build reputation as accessible → Show personality and humanise journalists, a change from less "cold" personas of the past → Build name recognition as a young journalist → Disseminate information about job changes, promotions, moving outlets, etc → Build up network of industry contacts, colleagues and friends → Promote work as freelancer and find opportunities → Find journalists around the world who can help before you travel → Build up reputation as an expert in your area and grow your public profile → Highlight and promote upcoming stories, events, shows, supplements, etc

A lot of the comments about the professional and sectoral value of having an active, visible account were tied to what it now meant to be an appealing prospect for an editor or manager looking to hire someone. This need to “be more employable”, and bring an audience with you – tied to digital pressures for news producers – was at the core of many comments around whether journalists are disadvantaged if not using social media:

“[If] you’re not promoting your stories and you’re not promoting your career online ... You’re not showing, ‘this is who I am. This is the hard work I’m doing’. And that’s a good way to **show potential employers your capabilities.**”

“In this business, in such a saturated market, you need to build your own profiles, make yourself more employable. The obvious, easy way to do that is through social media and through **gaining followers and getting a name for yourself.**”

“It’s definitely not the only criteria and people get jobs without any social media presence, if you’re good enough, but **it is a factor that is being taken into account because they need online readers** and access to online readers if they’re going to survive.”

Many noted that, of course, there were plenty of ways to excel in journalism without social media, but they pointed out the opportunities that will often arise if you are present in digital social spaces. Contributors repeatedly made the point that being visible online opens up opportunities for additional television and radio work. Some saw the benefits themselves when areas they were reporting on and had expertise in were picked up:

“If there’s a tribunal or during the pandemic or a particular court case, some certain topic you’ve been reporting on quite intensively over a number of weeks or even just over a number of days. That’s the kind of thing a radio or TV producer, they spot that [online] and will ask you to go on the show. Those opportunities are not going to happen if you’re not visible online.”

This journalist sometimes takes breaks from social media, but admitted that “when I step away, I do worry about the impact it has on my profile as a journalist” and the opportunities that might arise. Elsewhere, others resented what they felt was a “laziness” on the part of some producers and researchers to regularly approach the most vocal journalists online, even if they had no expertise on the topic but because they were easier and quicker to contact, and had already demonstrated a willingness to comment on it. One more established journalist said that, previously, it would have been more common for researchers to seek out different specialist correspondents and “do a bit more legwork”, but now – with added time pressure and fewer resources – it was often a case of “just see who’s been tweeting about the thing and that’s who they’ll have on”.

Another resented any perception that “the more you’re on social media, the busier or the more hardworking you are”, pointing out that for journalists on the road or preparing for multiple bulletins, **social media updates are not a high priority.** They felt frustrated that, if it impacts their number of followers, it could affect how their work is perceived which could become a factor in rounds of recruitment, promotion – or even redundancies. Despite this, it is also worth noting that some journalists had actually felt a shift in recent years away from the emphasis on social media. Some pointed out that traffic to news websites from social networks, especially Twitter, is actually relatively low, and another joked that there was a roll back on the push to use Twitter more within their organisation as senior staff realised “only journalists and political junkies and cranks are on it”. Another, who had experience in a managerial role, insisted that, overall, social media experience is

less of a concern now when hiring reporters as everyone is trained up in-house, which was in contrast to a decade earlier when individuals' existing profiles were paramount. However, many other contributors suggested the opposite, indicating that it felt more important than ever. Most felt that they were not forced to have social media accounts as part of their work and daily output, but many used the word "**encouraged**" or that they felt an "**expectation**" to be active to help attract attention to their story and "push it out to as many people as possible". Some also noted a self-fulfilling social/professional pressure coming from observing their peers: if a group of journalists were all at an event and everyone else was posting about it, then the journalist felt they also needed to post updates as, otherwise, it looked like their outlet was not present. Further discussion around what is actually expected from employers is explored in Section 6.

"If you're sent out to cover something, you're expected to send a couple of tweets on your own personal account, and then that'll be retweeted on the main account"

Some journalists remarked on the pressure not just to be present, visible and posting updates, but also to perform as the "ideal" version of a journalist online that is both **engaging and unproblematic**, with enough warmth and personality on show to attract followers. One noted she feels that "people don't respond well to a cold professional profile" and instead want to see what teams the journalist support or what they read. One sports journalist explained how she attended a boxing match in a personal capacity and shared that with followers: "I still wanted people to know I'm there and I'm enjoying myself ... I think that that's important that people get a bond with you, that they realise 'oh, she's just like me. She's here on the beer. You know, isn't that great?'" However, as the later sections of this report note, the more that journalists put out about themselves, often the more problematic content and negativity they get in return. Furthermore, some felt employers want an inoffensive but engaging journalist on show, but one who will not cause any controversy – which was a difficult balance to achieve:

"I would say employers, generally, want you to be on social media because it helps build your profile and therefore helps build their profile. But they want you to be so devoid of personality and watch what you say so much. I think it's a really, really, really fine line ... To give enough of yourself to be engaging, but not too much as to give away too much of your personal life or overstep with opinions or thoughts on things that aren't appropriate."

Some pointed out that they had **no desire to show much of their personality**, that they preferred to play it safe for fear of a backlash towards anything they say, and the precarious nature of many of their contracts mean that if they make any kind of mis-step, it could affect their reputation and "employability". Some resented the idea of the reporter being "a face", a "brand" or a "personality" and preferred a more traditional sense of relative anonymity, but this clashed with many of the current goals of news organisations fighting to be seen and heard in the digital space. Even something like Facebook's decision to de-prioritise news organisations and push individuals' pages was mentioned as a factor in some outlets' strategies to push individual journalists' profile pages.

Many articulated something of a **professional dilemma** about being active on social media, as one described: "I suppose my heart doesn't want to be on it and doesn't want to depend on it, but my head says I have to." Ultimately, the overarching feeling was that social media was a "double-edged sword": being visible, active, and present offered a swathe of positives and opportunities, while it also brought problems. The following section captures some of these problems which women journalists in Ireland have encountered.

// 4. DOCUMENTING NEGATIVITY

4.1 'Certain topics attract a reaction'

Some journalists could clearly identify the particular topics that would always attract negative engagement. Three participants singled out Traveller issues in particular, with one noting that any kind of positive story about that group leads to an inevitable onslaught and guarantees the most negative reaction in her work: "I've never seen anything like it." Others remarked on immigration as a topic which attracted consistently hostile responses, with one reporter "accused on a number of occasions of leading the white genocide of Ireland". Certain entertainment and showbusiness stories also led to dismissive remarks (see also section 4.5), while divisive areas like sport and politics could also trigger a backlash from loyal followers. One sports journalist noted this at county level in GAA, where fans feel so personally invested if something happens or you comment on a decision made in a match with which they disagree: "They feel you're wrong because 'it's my county and I'm going to get aggressive and heated on this debate because it's the one that engages me'." In sport and elsewhere, the tribal nature of divisions online is to the fore. One journalist covering international conflict noted that sometimes these topics can attract "troll armies" from overseas with another, whose work features events in Northern Ireland, noting:

"On particular stories it's worse than others but for me because the type of abuse I get is so sectarian and partitionist ... there's certain stories when I put them up I'm like 'oh for f*cks sake, this is gonna be a nightmare'."

One reporter, who does not work on politics herself, observed how women in the political domain "need really hard skins – and especially with the rise of Sinn Féin. They can be perceived as either pro- or anti-Sinn Féin, and God help them whichever way they go". On top of the partisan divisions online, many reporters in the political field felt they were regularly accused of being "mouthpieces" for the government or political parties which was a cause of some frustration, especially when the reporting they had done was not being recognised:

"[They think] that we're never going to question the government, we're never going to question a minister - 'why don't we tackle them?' That sort of stuff comes up just purely because you're a journalist and it will have no basis. A lot of the time you see that these people clearly have not read what you've written, because if they had, they'd realise that you *have* questioned the minister, that you *have* put the tough questions to the minister or the government advisor or whatever, and you've *actually* tackled in the article their exact criticism."

4.2 When things get personal

The journalists often described an ability to effectively disregard the sentiments embedded into some of the negative comments if they were targeting the events or subject matter of a report, rather than themselves: "When you're a news reporter and are playing it straight, sometimes the abuse you get is more to do with the story you're reporting on than, than yourself, you know?" This seemed to be particularly contentious on certain social issues and what some call "culture wars" around race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual or gender identity. Some also felt they were being criticised because of their association with the outlet they work for, with aspersions then cast about the individual

journalist. One described how people might be critical of her news organisation's previous reporting on an issue, and they take it out on reporters who have nothing to do with covering that topic. She explained how she had once put out a call on social media looking for people struggling to find accommodation:

“Loads of people were saying things like ‘you’re scum, you work for a scum newspaper’, ‘you’re the worst of the worst’, ‘I’ll never talk to you as long as you work for this organisation’, ‘how can you respect yourself when you work for these people?’ and things like that. So, as opposed to just taking issue with coverage or taking issue with an agenda or an editorial stance in the newspaper, it turns quite personal and vitriolic.”

Elsewhere, others said that pointing out factual errors is not something they object to and “there’s a certain extent that I can kind of take when it’s about my work. Maybe they don’t agree with the actual angle that was taken or maybe they make a valid point that I should have included”, and another explained that “I tend to be quite receptive if I do make a mistake and somebody tells me that – I want to change, I don’t want my work to continue to have a mistake in it.” However, the publicised, often ridiculing nature of this “feedback” can become increasingly challenging.

Some noted that the **shift towards remarks about their home and personal life** was a tipping point in how they perceived their interactions with the public. Many of the anecdotes which impacted the journalists the most were not necessarily the most threatening, violent, or abusive, but were the comments that they felt crossed a line. One reporter wrote a personal piece about their experiences and challenges of having a family member with autism, which attracted online reaction:

“Some of them were hurtful. One man messaged me like ‘you’re really close minded. Your family member would be so sad if they knew this, this is what you were saying about them’. People could really cut deep and I don’t know how they don’t realise you’re a person ... I felt like I’d put a lot out there. And then, I just felt like this is too personal. Like, no one should actually have to read these kinds of things. That’s kind of where my line was drawn.”

Another described some reaction she received about something she had written – which she thought was relatively light-hearted – about the challenges of finding clothes that are less gender stereotyped. She explained that the comments that irked her the most were those that suggested “oh it’s clear you always wanted a daughter and I’m sorry you ended up with a son when you didn’t want a boy”. She suggested it had irritated her and touched a nerve “because it’s so personal and it’s about my children, [and] stuff about my partner as well – [they’re] just casting aspersions on your personal life”.

Another significant element for journalists – and women in particular – is the constant commentary about their appearance rather than the substance of their work: the gendered nature of online negativity, and emphasis on appearance, is explored further in section 4.5.

“People can decide, because of your gender, where you’re from, your accent, how you look, whether you’re too skinny, you’re too fat. What outfit you’re wearing ... that’s where the real toxicity comes in, I think. Because that’s very hard to deal with on a personal level, because it’s not about what you’ve written, it’s not about your ability to do your job – it’s purely about who you are”

4.3 The spectrum of negativity

There is no one, consistent model for what hostility online looks like, how it impacts on journalists' morale, or even how frequent it is for them: 36 women were interviewed with 36 different experiences and attitudes. As one suggested, it can often come "in waves" based on certain articles or topics, which was a broadly echoed sentiment. Most indicated a semi-regular, low-level of negative and hostile material which, depending on the journalist, spanned the spectrum from mildly irritating to an outrightly dangerous threat. Many recalled particular instances which had stuck with them and which span that spectrum; these are included throughout the report, but ten examples are provided in Table 2. Some of the specific details given, and who was involved, have been omitted.

TABLE 2: 10 EXAMPLES OF NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES OF JOURNALISTS IN IRELAND

Amplified and 'piled on': One participant posted something about their opinion on the Covid digital vaccine certs and their use in restaurants and hotels. A high-profile columnist and commentator retweeted it. "I got about 2,000 abusive responses, quote tweets, retweets. One of them told me I should die and they sent me an image of my Photoshopped face on a body on top of a pile of people being burnt. And lots of really horrible Nazi imagery."

Famous spat: One participant was involved in an exchange with a well-known figure who was critical of her conduct in reporting a story. Over several days, the person kept posting about the journalist: "It was like they were trying to drag me in, to make me say something, to make me take the bait. And the more that happened, the more I was like 'well, I might just say nothing'. Because you're wading into a row where you're never going to win ... It's incredibly frustrating to sit at home while [all] these people are saying stuff about you."

Late-night threats: A reporter did a story critical of a certain cohort of businesspeople, and approached one of them for a comment. "He was sending veiled threats and text messages at 4am and being like, 'if you post a story, I'm going to make sure your career is ruined. I'll sue you for defamation'." When the story was out, he found the journalist's Facebook profile and took their personal photos. "He set up like 10 or 11 different accounts, and did a load of tweets tagging [people] with my face being like 'this b*tch is trying to make all these people homeless, blah, blah, blah'."

Mocked-up news story: Another interviewee described how someone designed a fake news report about her. "It was this 'exposé', that I was basically snorting cocaine and sleeping with people to get stories ... And he had taken photographs of me and put them into it. I remember going, 'Jesus Christ, that's really far', but I then forgot about it and it disappeared eventually."

Mocking an accent: One journalist, who had done some broadcast work, described how someone contacted her with a re-write of her report based on how it had sounded phonetically. "So if you imagine, like Ross O'Carroll Kelly. So instead of 'like', it would be L-O-I-K-E ... I suppose that was the first [negative] thing that really stuck out to me ... I have somewhat of a neutral accent, but a Dublin accent, and people say, yeah, 'I don't like your voice' or 'your voice is too posh, it's too Dublin'."

Unwanted contact from an old source: Someone who featured in a journalist's story more than a decade ago was still repeatedly contacting her on social media. "He would message me telling me that he'd seen me in a certain area of [the city] that day, an area that I had been in and that really worried me, it wasn't nice." The man also tracked down her husband "and bombarded him for a while with images and messages about me".

Targeted by group: A journalist produced a piece which questioned the appropriateness of a particular charity event. "I had such vitriol – hundreds of tweets, the language! What I was called... b*tch, a sl*t, it was absolutely and utterly horrific." It went on for weeks, online and via post, and a package was also sent to her office referencing something she had mentioned in the piece she wrote. For a few years, on a certain day, the abuse resurfaced online, led by a cohort of men with ties to the original fundraising campaign. "It was a full pile-on, and I had no doubt that being a woman absolutely contributed to that. So it was a horrific incident, very upsetting."

Ridiculed and shaming online: A journalist finished a piece of work which featured her cycling, but was criticised for her safety accessories. "Loads of tweets started coming in and it was these guys having a discussion, like 'look at this eejit. She doesn't even have a proper fitting helmet. It looks like she's never been on a bike before, how ridiculous' ... Just these lads literally pulling me apart for absolutely no reason. And I sat there [that] night for about two hours looking at it ... And I thought, 'wow, like, do any of you have sisters or wives or girlfriends or boyfriends? Like, why would you do that to someone?'"

Online imitations: This participant had a fake account set up using her name/profile photo from another platform, and the account was posting far-right comments in an online group. It was removed but not before her fake profile and activity was picked up elsewhere and her actual work called into question: "They were using words to describe me that were laughable and hilarious, but also quite unnerving".

Persistent emails: A teenage boy, with complex needs, developed an obsession with certain female journalists. "He has something like several hundred aliases online. So he will contact you one way or another." He pretended to be various people, asking the journalist to fill out a project questionnaire. "The emails got a little bit persistent" and "more threatening", and there were some red flags which led to the journalist contacting someone from his institution and discovering the problem with the person, who has since appeared in court.

4.4 From the screen into "real life": impactful and intrusive encounters

There is no doubt that online encounters can have a significant impact on journalists' mental health, wellbeing, and even manifesting physically in their day-to-day life. As one said, who was in the midst of a wave of negativity towards her work that week: "Some days you're able for it and some days you're not ... I was able for it yesterday morning and then in the afternoon I cried in Penneys." Furthermore, given much of the criticism towards them is public, they realise that friends and family can see much of it and they in turn worry, with the journalists then having to reassure them that all is fine. Receiving negative content on their smartphone devices – the same tools that many used to interact with friends and family – felt intrusive and journalists were exposed to it throughout the day, even when not technically at work: "It could be 6am on a Saturday morning. You're just waking up. You're bringing your kids to GAA and you get these hideous messages." This all-day aspect is further explored in Section 4.8.

Journalists' easy accessibility can bring challenges beyond just abuse or hostility. One described too many people contacting her via direct message with requests and questions "that you just don't have the time to get back to". Another referred to the sense of helplessness she felt having covered some issues related to animal welfare, as people were bombarding her with cases of neglect that warranted highlighting. "I was very overwhelmed, to the point of being upset because I couldn't do everything – you're kind of thinking, 'animals are suffering because of me' ... it's not a hero complex, you just want to do your best and expose these people." She said similar things could happen to any

journalist covering any topic in which real people are being impacted, such as healthcare. She highlighted that the public have genuine stories they feel need to be highlighted, but can then become critical if the journalist does not cover it, even if there is no capacity. Another journalist echoed this, recalling an emotional protest story she covered which did not get as much space as she had hoped for in the final output because there was another major news event that day. "It was one of those things when they were challenging me through social media. I was like, 'Jesus, I how do I explain that I'm not the one who makes the calls?'" One noted how reporters are at the "front line" of public anger and criticism about news content rather than those with more power, but relative anonymity, within the organisations.

In terms of unwanted attention, the breaching of the boundaries between digital and physical encounters was what unnerved many journalists the most, especially when they received messages from people who had clearly been in proximity:

"I was walking into work and I arrived in, and there was a tweet at me from one of the people who was harassing me online. It said 'oh, I just saw you on that street wearing blah, blah, blah, blah, looking great today, looking sexy' or something. And that's exactly where I'd just been. So that person had just seen me. And that really freaked me out because that was real life. That was that person - who had been harassing me for a few weeks - suddenly saying 'I just saw you on the street so I could have gone up to you'."

Another described how she always worked alone in her previous broadcast role, and a man – who frequently contacted female reporters – would message her, saying he had seen her in certain areas, and asked her about what kind of recording equipment she used. This was before the piece was shared by her organisation, so she knew there was no other way that he would know she had been there, other than being nearby: "When the abuse stays [on social media], I can sort of close it off a 'that's another land, it's not real'. But when it kind of crosses the line over into my real life, that's when it becomes problematic."

People knowing their physical location was on the mind of some, who had become very conscious of **not sharing personal information** such as anything that reveals their home area, or social media posts/streams that include their current or intended location, or upcoming plans, which gardaí had advised some of the journalists about. One journalist, who had worked on international assignments, was advised by her newsroom to not even use the Tinder dating app when on reporting assignments because anyone monitoring the app could get access to the nearby locations of journalists in the regions if they used the app.

Yet that is not always possible, especially for those working at recognisable locations such as sports stadiums, courts or political buildings, as one explained: "If you wanted to meet me, if you stood outside Leinster House long enough, you would bump into me, which is an issue." And even beyond the professional work environment, journalists – particularly those working in broadcast/television who were recognisable – had risks to grapple with. This reporter explains how she was approached outside of her working hours:

"One person kind of got in my face and was shouting at me in the street and all this carry on. And then they took a picture of me and put it online to their following and they had thousands of followers. And I saw a load of people piling on and calling me X, Y, and Z, everything under the sun."

"I'd never post where I was at a particular time. If I was putting something up about where I'd been, I would do it when I'm not there anymore"

Another journalist recalled being included in a list of names, circulated online and physically put on lampposts in her city, of people who were being accused of being involved in a particular religious takeover of Ireland. Incidents like this creeping into their physical, material day-to-day life clearly unnerved many of the journalists. Another noted that this has implications especially for women given the increased physical risk, and especially when other factors come into play:

“Someone might be racist and not like my work and, as a double whammy, they don’t like me because I’m a woman, you know? Or even more because I have an immigrant background. Or they’re guessing that I have. I guess it does definitely make me more vulnerable to be a woman journalist online, you are also more vulnerable to real-life violence. If they get a hold of you and they can come to your door, they can harass you in person ... you’d be more vulnerable than a man would be.”

4.5 Gendered dimension

Negativity towards journalists is, of course, not limited to women: many participants in this study recognised that both sexes face hostility online. As one said, people decide that you are “mainstream media, government shill or whatever, regardless of your gender, you will be attacked for whatever reason they decide on a given day”. Yet, most participants felt there was a distinction in the tone and type of content facing women journalists, which this section explores. One journalist, who works in broadcast, described a lack of awareness evident with some of her male colleagues; they often discuss the problems together and “and try to help each navigate all this as much as we can”, but there was a clear gap in experiences:

“If I’m having a conversation like that with a female colleague and there are male colleagues in the room, they will be shocked. They will be really, really surprised and they will say ‘really? That’s the kind of abuse that you get?’ ... they didn’t even realise that it was happening to us because it hasn’t touched their lives at all. So they didn’t even know it was a thing, really.”

Another also explained that while men might face criticism for their political views – such as their potential biases if they are a political reporter – women’s background, expertise and appearance are continually dragged into the response, and the language used is often coarser, with more sexualised content. Most participants said the majority of content, and the most problematic, came from men, noting that there is often an extra detail added in: “The way the abuse is hurled at you ... they’ll always throw in ‘typical woman’ or ‘whinger’ or something like that.”

Journalists working in broadcast or those who made **appearances on television or radio panels** felt there was an amplification in the attention they received because of their heightened visibility. As one said, “people feel they can say much more to you. They feel you’re more of a personality”. Another described how male colleagues could wear the same suit every night and nobody would care, “[but] if I wear the same coat two days in a row, I get messages asking me have I no clothes or have I not been to the dry cleaners or things like that. I’m always convinced that no one listens to the first two paragraphs of what we’re saying, because they’re just looking at our hair and what we’re wearing that day.” That latter point might seem trivial or harmless, but it contains a fundamental dismissing of their work’s value. This same journalist explained it further:

“Even when people try to give me compliments, it’s... it’s so depressing! I remember this series I had done on hospice care. And as you can imagine, it was absolutely heart-rending stuff, and I was so proud of it ... I was so delighted with it and all the messages I got were ‘have you lost a bit of weight?’ ‘I liked your dress in that second piece.’ And you’re just thinking ‘bloody hell, why do I bother? Who cares what I’m wearing or what my hair was like?’ People are telling you that you’ve lost weight. Tell me you enjoyed the piece and it affected you. I don’t care about [how I look].”

This frustration at the disconnect between the subject matter at hand, and the priorities of the commenter, was also touched on by another journalist in a more negative context and with a more critical undertone. She described covering the 2015 death of an Irish student, Karen Buckley, who was murdered in Glasgow by a man she had just met in a nightclub. “Some guy tweeted me and said ‘I hate your voice. I wish they’d send you home’. I was like ‘wow – here I am covering the death of some poor girl and that’s all that bothers you?’”

The constant emphasis on appearance was draining, even for those working in radio as many shows are now streamed. One explained how every time she does a certain segment, “he will send me a message about what I’m wearing, like ‘oh, that blue looks lovely on you, looking great this morning’ with the eye emoji”. She added there’s nothing outwardly offensive, but it is always just focused on her appearance and what she’s wearing: “There might be 20 messages in a row. I’ve never responded.”

Another explained the emphasis and assumptions made about her based on her appearance – that she “must be a honeypot” – as well as accusations that she sleeps with politicians and journalists to progress her career. That is combined with comments on her appearance when she appears on television: “About the size of my lips, the size of my arse, my eyebrows. About the jewellery I wear, the way I talk, the class that I am – I’m very obviously working class.” Ultimately, it is a relentless and tiresome aspect of the job which may impact some women’s willingness to get, or stay, in front of viewers. One reporter who works in television recalled the first sexist comments about her appearance she encountered when she was an intern and a video in which she appeared on camera was posted on social media and she was called a “wh*re” for wearing hoop earrings, while another recalled the comment saying “smelly prostitute” to a post she had shared, ironically about the abuse that certain women face online.

These outrightly sexualised, aggressive comments are complemented by what many women described as a low level but consistent stream of unsolicited advances or passive comments with a sexist undertone: one sports reporter described how, if she said something nice about a male player, she’d get responses like “are you looking for a husband?” Many insisted that these were not abusive and they were no longer phased by them. Nevertheless, it remains an additional burden especially when journalists benefit from open flows of communications such as having their direct messages (DMs) open or their email addresses published.

“I was wearing hoop earrings in the video. And - excuse the language - someone called me a wh*re for wearing them ... You get a lot of that. I think the funniest was I was called an ‘anti-information hooker’ ... Look, you have to laugh. Like, what are you going to do otherwise? It’s just, there’s lots of things. Again, excuse my language, but things like ‘fake news c*nt’, there is a lot of that”

“I have my DMs open on Twitter because you get good stories that way. And I get a lot of messages ... And they’re quite sexually explicit in nature. Some of them referring to sexual activities that they’d like me to perform on their genitalia and things like that. Some of them are innocent. Well, I say innocent in that, it’s not really appropriate considering Twitter is my professional platform, but they’re still like asking me out for a drink ... [Even on LinkedIn] men message me being like ‘you’re beautiful love’, ‘we should get drinks’, referring to me as ‘hun’ and ‘darling’ and stuff like that.”

Another described a previous article she wrote which included details on a certain sexual fetish and how “even years later I still get men sending me messages” with particularly details, and “the odd time there’s somebody creeping in who you’d prefer not to be”.

Beyond the sexual undertones, some contributors noted the **different type of criticism that come towards women journalists regarding their expertise**. One recalled a radio panel she was involved in with another woman and two men. Among the comments underneath the outlet’s tweet promoting the panel discussion, there were multiple negative remarks, from both men and women:

“It was all about ‘the two women had absolutely nothing to say, why were they even on it?’ And it was nothing about the men. ... And whatever about myself, I know the other woman was a doctor. She was a professor or a doctor, but a highly skilled woman with years of experience behind her, but it was just a massive coincidence that both of us were irrelevant and had nothing interesting or nothing to add to the debate. Whereas the men were fine, or there was certainly no comments on what they had to say. So you get that but you just, you just have to dismiss it.”

This was also apparent in certain areas like technology or motoring, with one journalist describing some of the reaction to an interview with the female co-founder of a computer game company, “Saying ‘you’re not a proper journalist and she’s not a proper gaming professional’, ‘what do women know?’ that kind of thing ... it got to me for about an afternoon, I was quite down about it”. It also arose in the sports sector with some pointing out the well-trodden claim that women were less capable to report on sports. One described how “my negative comments were never ‘oh, this is a stupid take,’ it was always ‘this is a stupid take, typical for a woman’”. This journalist described how she was able to process and cope with these kinds of comments now – “they’re probably a little bit intimidated at the fact that a girl knows more about sport than they do” – but there was the consequence of her wanting to avoid further criticism. Giving the example of wanting to highlight other aspects of her life and interests, but fearing a potential backlash, she added:

“I don’t want to pigeonhole myself into, ‘oh, I can only talk about sports’ because I have so many varied interests ... But there’s still a part of me holding it back again. To use the *Bridgerton* example: I would never start tweeting about *Bridgerton* because - this sounds terrible - but I’m conscious of being too ‘girly’.”

The fear of being perceived as too feminine is rooted in the realisation that misogyny is pervasive in online cultures – but that this is nothing new, nor is it limited to online spaces. One participant, who has worked in journalism for more than 30 years, remarked that: **“I always say as a woman, you’re too young until you’re too old”**, explaining how she’d been criticised in the past for being

too inexperienced, and now faces messages telling her to “go away” and “let a younger person do the job”. Another pointed out how, when she started in journalism more than two decades ago “I actually thought things were grand. I thought ‘what are women giving out about? We’re paid the same. We have all the opportunities’ and it’s been 20 years of learning that that’s not the case.” Although she is not a heavy user of social media herself, she recalls one exchange indicative of a general attempt to undermine women journalists’ professionalism and expertise:

“Somebody wrote something [about my news report] like ‘maybe her stories would be better if she didn’t get all her stories from her hairdresser’. Now, they wouldn’t say that about a man ... They were basically saying that I was poor at my job and that I was just some silly dolly bird who just gets stories from the beauty parlour essentially. That was their angle. It’s those sorts of things. The less outrageous stuff ... if you are getting that every day, I’d imagine that just builds up and builds up.’

One contributor, who often covered entertainment stories as part of her broader mix, pointed out that these more light-hearted topics lead to a different wave of criticism and attempts to undermine and trivialise her work, such as someone mocking a story she had written about Vogue Williams, sarcastically saying she was set to win a Pulitzer prize for it: “I was like ‘what is the need for that?’ I’m obviously writing other stuff that I am proud of. It’s just these things people are interested in and they have to be written about, too.” As more women than men report on topics such as celebrity and entertainment¹⁸, it is another way in which women’s work is targeted and subjected to ridicule.

This same reporter went on to explain **how she considered making herself invisible on stories** like this by not putting her name on them, as a male colleague had done with showbiz stories as he doesn’t want to be associated with them. “And then I was like ‘no’, because everything is important for your portfolio. And I don’t think you should be writing anything if you’re not going to stand by it.” Another pointed out a similar observation that journalists writing and reporting about entertainment, fashion, or certain live events – “anything that’s kind of female-focused” – will face the questions: “‘Why is this news? Why are you not writing about Ukraine? Why are you not writing about the serious issues of the day?’” as if they’re the only things that people want to read.” She pointed out that audience analytics in the newsroom show that the lighter entertainment-driven stories often perform best when the news is also filled with negativity or conflict stories.

Another example of the low-level but constant stream of negative content towards women is evident in the presence of what some referred to as “the reply guy”, a term Dictionary.com describes as “a man who frequently comments on tweets or other social media posts in an annoying, condescending, forward, or otherwise unsolicited manner – especially posts by women”. This constant grind of negative responses was exhausting for many; they didn’t claim they were abusive, but simply found the ever-present nit-picking another tiring and irritating aspect of their role.

“It’s been the biggest thing that’s changed my use of Twitter over the years – that anything you say will attract the ‘Pub Bore’, this guy who will just wear you down... [If] you make any anodyne point on Twitter and somebody would write back and say, ‘oh, but you’re forgetting about in 1994, this thing happened...’ And I’m like, ‘no, I just sent a tweet about a very minor issue. I’m not looking for a correction. I’m not looking to be kind of explained to, or someone trying to explain my point back to me’.”

¹⁸ Ross, K. 2021. Global Media Monitoring Project 2020 - Combined Five-Nation Report for UK and Ireland. <https://whomakesthenews.org/gmmp-2020-final-reports/>

“It changes your experience when you feel like anything you say is going to be taken very literally, but also as a starting point for a conversation with somebody you don’t want to talk to. And it’s always men and it’s always the people you really don’t want to talk to. I find that just really wearing, like that’s been really rubbish”

She explained how it would wear you down, and would never be classified as abuse or reportable to the social network, but it impacts your experience of being in online spaces. This was a common theme among participants: the presence of people who were quick to correct and challenge any point they could, and be constantly argumentative. Another journalist described how she had produced a story about electric vehicles and carbon emissions and “you’d swear I was the world’s worst person for highlighting the issue”.

One young reporter referenced an encounter with “Men’s Cycling Twitter” – her reference to an active cohort on social media vehemently promoting cycling – in response to something she had written about her own experiences while on a bike. She said they were claiming that she was “lying about my cycling experience, that I had made up that I’ve been pushed onto curbs and catcalled”, and accused her of discouraging women from cycling.

4.6 Change over time

Many working in the industry for a decade or more spoke fondly about what social media – and Twitter in particular – offered in its earlier days during the late 2000s/early 2010s, particularly for journalists in Ireland. One described a “friendliness to it for a long time, and it was a fun place to be and interact with people” with a clear sense of community, especially for journalists who made new friends and contacts both on- and offline. Another described how, “like any new social media platform, it was a bit of a wild west in the beginning ... Twitter was that in a really nice way”.

Yet crucially, there was a pattern among respondents suggesting that something had altered in the tone of the landscape in recent years: “It’s not as interactive as it used to be ... everyone’s very angry and narky, and so it’s losing its appeal.” Another journalist described how starkly different the current culture is on Twitter now compared with a decade ago; she lamented the potential she once saw in the platform compared with the reality of being a journalist using it now and the necessary precautions she has to take:

“It was unimaginable when I joined that I’d be taking measures to protect my privacy ... [when I joined] it was the time of the Arab spring. So Twitter was heralded as this absolutely revolutionary tool that was democratising the citizen voice and giving people a voice across the world who never had it. And I mean, that makes me kind of sad at the time because it was, it had potential as well. And then it’s wreaked such havoc in so many ways.”

The foundations of this shifting environment for journalists had seemingly been laid by a growing **anti-journalist sentiment** in recent years, with many participants feeling they are criticised simply for their choice of profession and being the middlewoman delivering the news with which people are frustrated: “People want to criticise you for reporting the story because they don’t like the story or what’s happening and you’re the face behind that.” Of course, contributors noted how the public could always have their say in some form if they were unhappy with journalists, but it would manifest in much fewer, tamer encounters, as one recalled from her earlier days as a young reporter: “People used to ring the newsroom, especially on a Sunday night when they were lonely or drunk, and kind

of give out to you, but that was that. And maybe you might get the odd letter in green ink." Another reflected that a letter arriving to a newsroom was more bearable as it is "so much more distanced than constant messaging sent directly at you", reinforcing the intrusive nature of social media interactions for many journalists.

As this ease of communication is coupled with a rising anti-journalistic sentiment, the backlash from the public is as pervasive and vitriolic as any of the participants had ever seen. **The idea of biases and unprofessionalism was a repeated trope** coming towards journalists, which jarred with how journalists tend to view their work: "People who spend a lot of time online no longer believe that news is objective. And of course, you never achieve complete objectivity, but journalists strive for it. And a lot of them make a good stab at it, but people think everything is loaded." This disconnect between the journalists' perspective and that of a sceptical public was something which some

"Once a guy came along and started videoing me saying "this is fake news". And [saying] that I was just part of the whole cabal of journalists that are pushing fake news onto the country"

journalists now reflected on: "When you go into journalism, you're like, 'oh, I want to change the world. And I want to hold people to account.' And I don't think other people outside of journalism see it that way." Sometimes journalists linked this to "the whole Trump effect, the constant criticism" evident both on and offline. One journalist, who worked in broadcasting,

described how she is subjected to people shouting "fake news" while out doing a report; she added that it wasn't always present and had "crept into the Irish psyche" over recent years. Such a move from online hostility towards in-person attacks was noted particularly by those in broadcasting who are typically more recognisable and have branded equipment which, as this reporter outlines, serves to somewhat dehumanise them:

"Since Covid that kind of negativity that you might have experienced just online has crossed over now into in-person. People feel like they have a right to come up to you and say whatever they feel or whatever they're thinking ... When you're out and you've got company branding or anything like that with you, people know who you are. They don't see a person, they see an establishment, an organisation, a big thing called 'news' ... You are just there, right there, and they can take out their frustrations on you."

This reporter noted that during Covid, "that was without a shadow of a doubt the worst time", and this was picked up by various contributors who described the uptick in hostility coming towards them. One suggested that the pandemic was not necessarily "the beginning of it or the cause ... things were getting worse before, but it definitely intensified". Some journalists noted the 2017-2018 run-up to the Eighth Amendment abortion referendum was when they first experienced heightened criticism and discrediting of their work or their colleagues' work, with what felt like targeted campaigns against their coverage. However, it was the pandemic where things became more widespread. One suggested that journalists suffered during Covid-19 coverage for "doing a job that perhaps the government should have been doing" in terms of communicating clearly and, therefore, felt the wrath of public frustrations because of their role as the messenger. Yet that angst towards journalists clearly developed into something more with clear targeted attacks on individual journalists. Three examples are outlined in Table 3.

TABLE 3: EXAMPLES OF JOURNALISTS' NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19

'Badly trolled'	'Pictures of nooses'	'They used her photo'
<p>The journalist was involved in a piece about mask-wearing when restrictions started to be lifted: she said that, personally, she was happy to keep wearing them if it helped keep others safe and showed support for frontline workers. "I got so badly trolled on Instagram – I had to go private as a result. People were accusing me of pushing the pro-government agenda, of being pro-vax. I had all these anti-vaxxers on me and it wasn't even a particularly controversial article. It was just a woman, with a certain profile, expressing an opinion. And that seems very triggering for a lot of people in social media."</p>	<p>A journalist reported on a major breaking news story about the latest Covid restrictions which appeared online one night. "I got death threats. I got sent pictures of nooses, of ropes in my DMs saying, 'this is coming for you' ... It was just chaotic for days. There were people basically saying, 'how dare you?' and insinuating that I had further damaged their mental health at that time. And that then has an impact on me, because you're worried thinking 'God is that person okay?' And then you have to snap yourself out of it, and be like 'your job is to deliver the news to people, even if it's good news or bad news'."</p>	<p>This journalist was repeatedly criticised for being a "voice for pharma companies" when promoting the vaccine during the pandemic. She encouraged parents to get their children vaccinated and even shared a picture of her daughter who was just vaccinated: "I just tweeted a photo of her with her sticker and it ended up [that] someone took the photo and used it on Facebook in an anti-vax post. So that was one thing recently that really annoyed me and that made me stop and think ... I learned my lesson."</p>

Some were relatively empathetic to the public during the pandemic – "tensions were high, stress levels, anxiety, everything was intense" – while another noted that "trolling reached new levels because people were at home, they were bored, had more time on their hands... [some] were in a very bad head space". Yet the struggles that the public were facing amid lockdowns and health fears were, of course, also something journalists themselves were living with:

"I found the pandemic really exhausting, I found social media a very tiring place to be, on Twitter in particular. And it was just a generally difficult time. And for all journalists, we were all so busy and everybody was completely worn down on top of that. Our own personal and work lives completely changed like a lot of other people's, but we were busier than we'd ever been. And we were reporting on the really grim thing that had changed our lives every day. So I think that was very difficult. And then to have the added kind of hostility that you were getting online from people, and a lot of it was so nonsensical as well. That was a bit of a burden."

Beyond the pandemic and regarding the landscape more generally, participants spoke about aspects of "mob control", "voices shouting really loudly", and an almost zero-tolerance approach to opinions which do not align with others. They cited a clear lack of empathy for the journalist's perspective or circumstance, and this realisation of a hostile audience ready to pounce can bring its own pressure for journalists when they are trying to decide what to share or not, or what is likely to be judged or garner a hostile reaction.

Aside from the pandemic, many contributors remarked on how quick people were to anger and to respond to journalists, even for something minor or seemingly innocuous. This might range from small things like a typo in a social media post (“call yourself a journalist, how can you be so stupid?”), to a reaction to more substantial issues and accusations of perceived biases, agendas, or unprofessionalism. One experienced journalist noted how unforgiving online audiences had become; she recalled how she had once made an error of judgement with some details in a high-profile story, but then agreed to go on a current affairs panel to discuss the issue.

“I remember just bricking it [beforehand] and saying ‘how am I going to handle this?’ ... And I went on the show and I just sincerely apologised. I said, ‘we got it wrong. I am genuinely very sorry that we got it wrong. We didn’t have the right checks and balances in place. And we will do better in future’ basically. And I was kind of astonished myself because, once I’d apologised, it was accepted and the show moved on ... it was actually very reassuring that you could make a sincere apology, it could be accepted and you could move on. And I think unfortunately in a social media era, that doesn’t happen very often. If somebody does go out and make a sincere apology, it’s very often not accepted at face value. And then something can gain legs again and something can just become a bigger deal.”

A common thread raised in the interviews was the tetchy, argumentative and draining nature of social media platforms: “It’s like a yelling effect, like one person yells, so they yell at the next person. They yell at the next person.” Twitter in particular was highlighted as a place where somebody will always have something to say. As one contributor noted about offending anyone with something seemingly innocuous: “You could say, ‘I love this sunny day’. And then someone might say, ‘well, I’ve got this terrible illness and I can’t be out in the heat. You’re not even thinking of people like me’”. Someone else suggested that journalists find themselves at the mercy of what the “Twitterati” will be outraged at that day: “[If they] decide that for whatever reason on a given day, you are their target, that obviously is just an absolute hellish place to be” which can have serious repercussions on self-confidence and mental health.

4.7 Downplaying the negatives and normalising hostility

During one interview, one participant initially said “I’ve never gotten a huge amount of abuse” before later reflecting on some of her own experiences which involved both the gardaí and the courts, and suggesting she has developed a distorted baseline, taking for granted the hostility which is present. She noted that she was “desensitised” at this stage, and had effectively lost perspective of the scale of what had happened with a previous legal case and the activities of the man which had led to a conviction.

This downplaying or normalising of the negativity, abuse and hostility coming towards the journalists interviewed was common: although not everyone had had legal encounters, there were frequent patterns of expressions suggesting that other female journalists and colleagues had it much worse than they did: seven of the reporters even used the word “lucky” to suggest they were actually fortunate that what they had

“I think it does say a lot about our bar, that the bar for me and for women you’ve spoken to, that we do probably play down whatever abuse there is. Or you just go, ‘oh, that’s just there. It’s just something that happens”

experienced was not quite as bad as what others had, yet all then noted some level of negativity coming towards them online. For example:

“I’m **lucky** because I haven’t gotten a huge amount of it but, like, I definitely have. I remember before I beefed up my Facebook privacy settings, I got a message on there ... it was like, “oh, you better watch yourself. You little, see-you-next-Tuesday (c*nt), you’d wanna be watching yourself” and all this stuff. And like that... that rattled me.”

“I feel like I’m **lucky** because I know there are female journalists, who’ve gotten way worse than I have. ... I mean, a lot of it was kind of generic with me. I think just being accused of being a liar, or the word hack being used or, ‘you’re just a shill for government information’. That kind of stuff is what I tend to get more. I mean, I’ve got some pretty bad emails, a couple of emails I’ve gotten called stupid b*tch or something like that.”

This suggests a normalisation of regular hostility towards themselves and their professional work, and also indicates a refusal to be perceived as a victim. Their articulation of a positive feeling of being fortunate – rather than giving in to a sense of vulnerability – can serve as an empowering component to maintain professionalism and demonstrate strength and resilience. Furthermore, many journalists forcefully dismissed any suggestion that they should be intimidated or put off by the negative content they receive. One explained that seeing the negative reaction to her work actually fuelled her to stay vocal and present: “A lot of the reason I stay on Twitter is because I don’t want these f*ckers to win and they don’t want me there. So I nearly think, I need to be there just so they don’t win, you know?”

Regardless of the scale, legal status or specific nature of the negative content which individual journalists encounter, there is something of a chilling effect in witnessing the experience of others. As one put it, “even if you haven’t [experienced much yourself], when you see it facing other journalists or other politicians, it still weighs on your mind. It doesn’t have to be directed at you for you to know this is the kind of reaction that you can get”. This functions as something of a warning shot, whereby journalists realise that putting their head above the parapet comes with risks.

Elsewhere, some journalists were adamant that online insults and negative remarks should not be dwelled on too much, particularly given some of the more material threats which journalists have encountered, especially those who have been involved in various aspects of crime and policing:

“These keyboard warriors – they certainly don’t really bother me to be honest with you. I just switch them off, block them. Again, maybe that’s my job because like a lot of the crime journalists have experienced more real things, more real threats. So somebody putting out a nasty comment, it’s not very nice, but I would just delete it and block. That’s how I’ve always handled it ... sometimes, with the criminals, it’s similar – when you react to it, or if you show you’re bothered, that’s a negative way of behaving.”

This idea of blocking and not engaging with people, as well as other potential solutions to try to deal with many of the issues highlighted here, is further explored in Section 5.

4.8 Constant work and blurred boundaries

A final point to consider when evaluating how social media interactions can impact journalists' lives involves moving beyond the hostile or negative content they receive, although the relentless nature of that is also relevant here. Many of the journalists spoke about how difficult it was to detach themselves from social media beyond their working hours:

“If it’s a weekend or just even a day I’m off, or even after work, I’ll often get messages on, say Twitter or Instagram, either talking about an article I’ve written or asking me if I’d be interested in something else. And so you’re just never really switching off.”

Another young journalist remarked how “I’m sometimes writing emails and responding to people on social media until four hours past when my shift ended or late at night”. Apart from being contacted beyond their working hours, there was clearly an internalised pressure to provide updates to their newsroom colleagues if they see any breaking news on social media after their work day has ended. Others explained how the Covid shift towards working from home had further blurred the boundaries “because your work is in your home as well ... it’s still kind of in your hand and your phone”. Another point identified was how the fast-paced nature of news and breaking-news culture online ensures that some journalists felt a professional obligation to keep stories updated, for

example if a statement relating to an earlier published story arrives in their inbox. Otherwise, they can be criticised for being “unfair” to the subject of the story if that update and statement is not published.

“Journalism is a really hard job. No matter what people say, it is actually a really difficult job and it’s time consuming and it takes over every thought. So to have [social media negativity] on top of it, it’s not sustainable for people’s mental health and their mental wellbeing”

Messages, comments or notifications about stories and posts arriving on their devices outside of their working hours was problematic enough for some journalists, who pointed out that it added to the challenge of properly disconnecting. Yet the issue is even more intrusive when those comments and messages are abusive or critical of them. One journalist described how it can set the tone for the day immediately first thing in the morning, whether they are in work that day or not: “You have a story that’s been published overnight – you wake up and you see these messages. And, straightaway, your day is off to a bad start because you’re like ‘OK, this is what’s in store now’.”

Many deleted the Twitter app, in particular, from their phones when on holidays, pointing out its “addictive” quality, although some insisted their genuine interest in the topic they reported on – such as politics or sport – meant they did not feel that simply consuming content from their social media feeds was a problem. Despite this, there are clearly formal boundaries being eroded because of the always-on, portable nature of social media and smartphones. One journalist compared this constant connectivity with what someone working on a Sunday newspaper would have traditionally experienced: “Before social media, you would log off Saturday evening at like 6pm/7pm. And that’s it. Then you buy the papers on Sunday morning, you skim through them, see what’s happening. And then Tuesday, you’re back to work.”

Everything outlined in Section 4 can, understandably impact on journalists' wellbeing and it captures some of the burden that social media brings to their daily work. The following section explores how journalists try to manage and attempt to re-assert control over their social media interactions, and deal with some of these negative dimensions.

// 5. DEALING WITH NEGATIVITY

5.1 Public Vs Private accounts

Most journalists followed a broadly similar pattern of having a public profile on Twitter and a private Instagram account. Some had a Facebook account which was often a hybrid, typically established as a personal account but evolving as their journalism career also developed, although among others it was kept as a private/locked personal account. None mentioned Snapchat accounts for work, while four had some experience or training producing TikTok videos, and another four mentioned that they consumed TikTok content but did not post anything either personally or professionally. One mentioned Reddit and one mentioned Telegram. The journalistic “obsession” with Twitter was noted by many – often with participants pointing out the problems or frustration with this – while some spoke about Facebook’s particular utility for contacting sources and posting in groups. Many spoke about the social network platforms in spatial terms, and Instagram was, overall, seen as a welcome separate environment from their other work accounts. It was described as a “nicer, softer, place” with less critique, and where journalists felt they could express more personality, especially when set to “private”.

“Instagram is like my little outlet. If I want to put up a picture of my holiday, I’ll put it up there ... it’s limited to family and friends really, so I’m not worried about what I put up”

Given its importance to journalists, most of the discussion in this section relates to filtering options available on Twitter (and sometimes Instagram and Facebook) offering journalists some control over their interactions and who can contact them. Considering the range of ways in which journalists can be targeted or approached online – email, comments sections under stories, direct messages on any of the social platforms, replies and comments under their posts, and being tagged into other people’s posts – there are unsurprisingly advantages and disadvantages to all the mechanisms in place. This section explores some of these tools and settings which the participants can use to help them navigate and exert some authority over interactions and what material they receive.

5.2 Ignoring

At the simplest level, many journalists described how the best and easiest way to deal with the negativity they received was to just ignore it. This served two purposes: (i) to avoid letting it consume their attention, take up time, and impact their mood, and (ii) to not give the person/s at the other side the “satisfaction” of seeing them get irritated or defensive. One journalist, who had experience covering criminals, noted an overlap and how keeping up some type of barrier was crucial. She suggested that “reacting to it is feeding it”:

“You’re better just to keep quiet about it and it’ll go away because it is an emotion [from them], isn’t it? Like, it’s either done in anger or it’s done in jealousy or it’s done in hatred or whatever, but those emotions just die out when they’re not fed. Whereas if you feed it and you keep talking about it or you refer to it, then there’s a lot of very nasty people out there who will really get pleasure out of that.”

Another described how she effectively “shuts the door” in terms of interactions, while many noted having to fight the urge to respond to people, especially if they “hit a raw nerve”, or when there are lies or misunderstandings evident about the actual reporting. Some said this was the only time they would engage – when there was a clear factual error they could correct about the work conducted – but anything that veered towards an ideological, personal or abusive remark was disregarded. Many journalists felt there was simply “no point” in engaging with people who seemed to have little interest in the truth or in having a civilised exchange of views:

“I just ignore negative messages, especially negative replies to tweets that I put up. Because I just feel like you’re going down a really, really dark hole when you engage. And you know what? It gets you nowhere because these people who decide that they can say anything they like or just throw any sort of abuse at you – you’re probably not going to change their minds. Even if it’s blatantly obvious that what they’re saying is utter nonsense, not based in reality, you’re not going to get anywhere with responding to them.”

Some simply chose not to look at the responses – “if my stories are on Facebook, I won’t even look at the comments. I don’t want to see what people are saying because they will say negative things”. Yet it was often impossible to escape because the journalists were getting direct emails, messages, and mobile alerts drawing their attention to the negative reactions and abusive or hostile content. Many social networks allow various filters and settings to be used, explored in more depth below, but one feature is to turn off notifications for a particular post that the journalist has sent or is tagged in, which minimises the intrusion on to their devices.

“For the most part, if I do a story and there are racist comments under it, not about me [but] just about the story and a lot of them involve misrepresentation of the information and me being tagged ... I’ll just mute notifications. I just completely disengage because it’s just not worth it.”

Another explained how the sheer scale of notifications can be overwhelming, regardless of their content, and that it is important that she is not distracted by the conversation or comments under the post; so she will often mute the post after an hour, and “then I might check it if I remember after a day or two”, pointing out that reading comments is simply not her priority when working.

5.3 DMs open?

Direct Messages (DMs) are a way of privately messaging someone on a social media platform. On Twitter, the journalists can adjust their profile settings so that their DMs are “open” meaning anyone with a Twitter account can send them a message, or restricted so that only people who the journalist follows can send a message. If “open”, then messages from people they do not know will go into a folder called “message requests” which many felt acted as a useful initial filter that they could then skim through and review for anything of value (similar filters are available on Facebook and Instagram).

Considering identifying sources and exchanging information was a key motivation for using social networks and Twitter in particular, there was a **mixed attitude towards whether or not DMs should be “open”** for other users to easily contact the journalists, with many pointing out the professional benefits and the fact they’re a “handy resource” to respond to people’s queries and contact potential sources: “Twitter is a great medium for connecting with people in that sense, professional connections or whatever you want to call it, so yeah, I definitely keep them open.”

Another explained how there were some advantages and consequences to being more approachable, as touched on in the previous section:

“I have my DMs open on all my platforms because you do get stories from them ... The other side of it is sometimes you do have people sliding into your DMs and sending you unwanted messages and unwanted comments that, well ... maybe they think it’s flattery, but it’s certainly not.”

One journalist, who did not have her DMs open, rejected any expectation of direct connection with anyone with an anonymous identity, which was more likely if she had open DMs. She added that those women journalists who did were “brave”, explaining that “if I don’t follow someone, then I guess they have no right to any intimacy with me and vice versa”. Some referred to these unwanted messages as a “hazard”, while one pointed out the expectation from her employer to be open and contactable. Regarding employment, one freelance journalist pointed out how it was effectively impossible to switch them off because she relied on requests from editors who want her to produce work: “You might get really good opportunities that just come out of nowhere that are last minute. So, you have to keep an eye on those. These will come into your email or your WhatsApp or your Twitter DMs.” For some, the very perception of being open and contactable was important and was, perhaps ironically, a means to fend off further criticism:

“I’ve always had my DMs open ... I’ve never wanted to be the type of person who appears closed off. Because again, I feel like that makes people ... in a way I feel like that would give them more ammunition if they couldn’t get in contact with me. I feel like that might just escalate problems.”

Given the criticism journalists face for their role, this concern about how they are perceived is not uncommon. Some had also developed a sense of knowing what was likely to trigger a response; one described how she adjusted her DM settings accordingly, as it was always in the back of her mind, especially if she had a big story coming out. She said she might close her DMs “so I don’t have to have people messaging me”, adding: “I know that is actually really bad, but there’s been a few stories I’ve had where I’m like, ‘Jesus, I don’t want to have to deal with this for a few days’.”

Journalists have an element of control over their DMs, but some noted the widespread visibility of their email addresses – on news outlets’ websites, in social media profile bios, or sometimes at the top/bottom of stories – and how this format of negative engagement can feel even worse and “more intrusive” than messages or comments that come via social media because somebody actively took that extra step to go and send an email. Others had learned that sometimes people monitor their social media posts and then email them about some of what they had posted rather than interacting with them on the social platforms, which some felt was worse and gave a sense of being watched, even though they understood that their accounts were, of course, public. Elsewhere, some felt emails were a more genuine attempt at feedback and interaction with the journalist rather than public social media comments as it shows “I’m not doing this for clout” or to publicly shame a journalist.

“I think there’s just something about the fact that somebody takes the time to compose an email. Like, not even just a response to a tweet – they take the time to compose an email, to tell you that you’re a stupid b*tch. There’s something about that that seems a bit more sinister”

5.4 Blocking and muting

Journalists on social media platforms have the option to block another user meaning that this other user cannot directly contact them and cannot see the journalist's posts, or comment under them, or have any interaction. The participants had a mixed attitude towards blocking, with some simply pointing out why they used the tool so much: "Life is just too short to be letting people send you nasty messages, abusive messages." One journalist described how she had blocked almost 700 accounts, and had no problem doing it liberally if people were critical of her work or the comments were too personal. Crucial to the journalists who had this approach was the clear belief that nobody – not even journalists – should ever be forced to witness and consume material which was so offensive, hostile or aggressive, and they argued that it is absolutely within their rights to minimise their exposure. Another pointed out how the block tool is the single most useful feature for her, and it is pivotal to her ability to enjoy these social spaces:

"That's what 'block' is for – if you just want the positive experiences out of social media, you can actually get that because that's the functionality of it ... being able to just create the space where you follow the people that you want to follow, you block the people that you don't want to follow you. And you try to engage with the stories you want to engage in. You can create your own universe and try to block out the bad stuff."

Others took a more reluctant approach. One described blocking as "the last straw", and some noted how they only blocked when they felt someone had crossed a line; in their experience things eventually died down quickly because of the "life cycle of [something on] social media". Among the other journalists who had resisted blocking as much as possible, three other perspectives are worth highlighting:

- (i) Some had **ideological issues** with the notion of journalists easily/frequently blocking people and how it might limit people's access to information about current affairs when they post their work. Related to this is the idea that journalists should not necessarily be quick to put up boundaries and actively exclude audiences and limit interactions.
- (ii) Some raised concerns about how their blocking would be **perceived by others**. They either did not want the person in question to know that they had seen or been affected by the content, or the journalist did not want it to be suggested that they were not able to "handle" the critique (further explored below).
- (iii) Some drew on concepts of **free speech** and the importance of seeing and encountering material that you did not agree with, or hearing a mix of perspectives and reaction to your work, however critical it is.

A crucial point that most participants noted, regardless of their own attitude towards these filtering practices, was that any vision of social media interactions as always being a valuable exchange of ideas is something very different from enduring hostile, aggressive messaging and content. Each journalists' approach and attitude were clearly shaped by their own experiences which had led them to their current stance and approach. Broadly speaking, the respondents who blocked most frequently and freely were those who had experienced the highest level of targeted negative content, while those who were more relaxed had fewer problems online. One said "it took me a

Block @anonymous121223?

@anonymous121223 will no longer be able to follow or message you, and you will not see notifications from @anonymous121223.

Cancel Block

THE BLOCK FUNCTION ON TWITTER

while to get there” as, early in her career, she did not want to block people as she did not want to give them the satisfaction, but “as I’ve got older and a few more years in, I just think ‘no, life’s too short’. Just block them, make them go away”.

This idea of not giving people the “satisfaction” of being blocked, or causing less hassle and backlash, led many participants to prefer the “mute” function. If a journalist mutes a follower, the follower’s posts and responses do not automatically appear visible in the journalists’ feeds but they are still free to interact and view each other’s content if they wish. While someone who has been “blocked” by the journalists can see that, a person who has been muted will be unaware and have no indication that the journalist has muted them.

Some journalists felt this was a “softer” way to filter interactions, while it also removed the temptation of getting into petty arguments with people, and avoided any backlash or criticism for having used the block function. Sharing the fact that you had been blocked by a journalist acted as something of a badge of honour for certain members of the public who relished such a reaction, and journalists realised this: “When you block, then all they do is proudly show a screen grab of the block and say ‘oh, I must have done something right’.” One journalist described how a few years previously, she had unblocked everyone who had abused her and then muted them instead, so they could not use the fact they had been blocked against her. Others noticed that, as journalists, there may be a time when you need to contact people who you might actually rather avoid online, and the mute function facilitates this:

“I tend to use [mute] quite liberally because maybe it’s someone I don’t want to unfollow or un-add because they could be someone that could come in handy later, which I know is a terrible way to view people, but everyone’s a source, everything’s copy. But maybe I just don’t necessarily agree with their viewpoints all the time, or maybe they tweet too often and it’s blocking up my newsfeed. So if I mute them, then I can check in when it suits me.”

Regaining some semblance of control was paramount and appeared to be the underlying reason in why journalists were confident in their approach to these filtering practices, and finding some kind of relief, and even satisfaction. One described how “it’s a balm, it’s lovely to just hit that mute button” or another explained how “I love a block ... the idea of someone shouting at you into the abyss is just so enjoyable.”

“I think the mute button has been amazing ... I would say muting feels more nuanced because people don’t know they’ve been muted. But it gives you a bit of power ... You feel like you’re being proactive, [that] you could do something to shut down a conversation without having to resort to blocking somebody which can feel antagonistic, or people can screenshot it”

5.5 Limiting replies

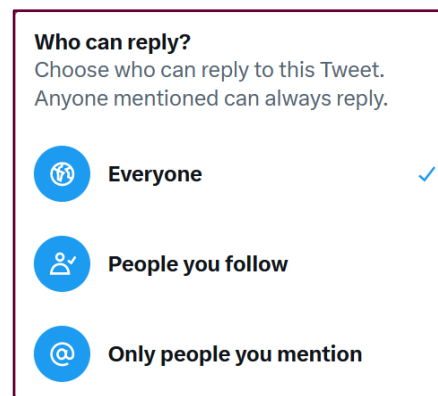
A final feature discussed was, on Twitter specifically, the option to limit responses, which allows journalists to curtail who can reply to each of their individual posts. This is a relatively new feature on the platform, introduced in late 2020. Some journalists who had experimented with it felt this also gave them another element of control to limit interactions, which could be particularly important for court cases where issues around commentary arise, or for highly personal pieces in which they want to minimise the critical response that may arise.

One explained how she employed this function in certain Covid stories or social justice topics such as coverage of transgender issues: "I turn my replies off because it doesn't matter what you're saying, either side of the spectrum, the political spectrum, are going to be like 'you shouldn't be writing this'." Furthermore, beyond just themselves, others pointed out that the feature was a way to try to **protect the subject or sources in their stories from critical comments**. Another journalist described how she had limited replies on "sensitive topics" like eating disorders or Travellers, and particularly if it is a human-interest story focusing on the source's personal experiences: "I don't want to give anyone an opportunity to say horrible things about these particular people, especially when they're vulnerable. I think that is something to be really conscious of." Nevertheless, some were mindful of the perception that using this "limit replies" feature could create further pushback from people who were already cynical about journalists' supposed biases and reluctance to engage with voices that might be critical of their work:

"I think sometimes the public see that, and they get a bit sceptical because they're like 'where is the transparency here, I want to criticise your piece ... I just want to raise some issues I have with your article' but they can't reply to you because you have your replies turned off ... [They're like] 'their comments are turned off so we can't question this and blah, blah, blah, controlling governments, controlling media', all this kind of stuff."

5.6 Pulling back and pre-empting negativity

The majority of journalists acknowledged that they hold back on giving strong opinions on social media. For some, this was simply embedded as part of their journalistic values, regardless of the technology or platforms as they felt that their opinion on a topic should be of little concern to the public: "We're just here to report the news. We shouldn't be saying 'this is disgraceful!' We just have to present the facts and let people make up their own minds". For some, they had no desire to share views – "I personally feel uncomfortable exposing my personal biases" – and they felt it a professional obligation to remain somewhat detached and removed, and ensure they were never part of the "story" or controversy themselves. Some mentioned how their **employers have strong guidelines on remaining as impartial as possible**, especially relevant for those working in public service media. One described how it was unreasonable for her to be posting ill-considered points or if "I'm spit-balling and just spontaneously putting whatever I think in my head up there": "It's not right. It's not fair on my organisation. It's not fair to the people who are listening or viewing because they might [trust it] because it comes with that clout of the organisation I work for."



THE LIMITING REPLIES FUNCTION ON TWITTER

This journalistic value of remaining impartial particularly on current affairs and political issues was evident, but there was a deeper resistance that appeared tied to the environment and general critical culture now evident on social media platforms; as one journalist said, “the kind of toxic nature of Twitter definitely stopped from giving more opinions”. This was not just comments relating to controversial or sensitive political issues but could cover any aspect of the journalists’ daily lives which they previously shared, such as thoughts about food, sport, home life, television, or even the weather.

“If I thought there was lack of female coaches in football, I wouldn’t bother putting that up because you’re gonna straight away get a load of negative responses or things like that ... I was going to put something up the other day and I was like ‘oh no’, because people will be tweeting me back and I just don’t want to know about it.”

This pre-empting of negative reactions led to social media profiles which some participants acknowledged were now becoming very “vanilla”, “business-like”, and “professional”, with one even explaining how if she shared something light-hearted or a joke, she makes clear it is not serious because “there’s been an increasing amount of sensitivity, there seems to be this outrage everywhere”. **Many journalists now strive to be as unobjectionable and inoffensive as possible**, a change for many from a decade earlier where sharing insights into their daily lives on social media was more common. This was especially true among those who admitted that they had previously given quite a lot of their personality, with one referring to a “self-censorship” about *everything* which was now in place for her. There was, overall, a general sense that the more of yourself you put out there, the harsher the reaction.

“I think the more vocal you are on Twitter or the more present you are on Twitter, you probably open yourself more to criticism.

And that’s why, to be honest with you, I’ve taken a step back from it. Because if you’re not active on it, I figure they won’t start to abuse me, you know?”

Many had picked this up from observing what was happening to their journalistic peers both in Ireland and overseas, suggesting that those who shared more about the non-journalistic aspects of their lives appeared to face more criticism. This was seemingly a factor in why some had chosen to effectively stay strictly professional, or even withdraw further, from social spaces online.

“Personally, I would be in the group that tries not to share ‘I went on holidays to west Cork’ or whatever, ‘I bought a new dress’. That’s not the thing that I feel I want to share ... That’s not me being negative about people who decide to share more. But it is a question of, the more you share, the more you probably are putting yourself out there for attack.”

Others noted that some journalists, male and female, appeared to relish the confrontations online – “It feels like a bit of a war of attrition for them every day on there and they’re fine with it” – and it becomes a big part of their online identity. One journalist commented that how “building the persona” was something that would gain more attention for those journalists, whether positive or negative, which can be a valuable currency given the industry landscape outlined earlier. If employers are expecting journalists to promote their work, and if a large following is seen as an asset when looking for work, it then becomes a concern if women journalists feel this self-censorship and holding themselves back is their safest option, thus impacting their visibility. One admitted to

being “nervous” before posting certain stories, while others described how they consciously choose not to promote or share stories if they pre-empt a backlash. One referred to how with contentious issues including protests around women’s reproductive rights and the Eighth Amendment, there was more of a reason *not* to promote their work than to share it, because it garnered a hostile reaction regardless of what was covered, which will inevitably affect its reach and metrics/performance online.

“Whether they were pro-choice or not, there was no point in tweeting because you just open up a whole can of worms and you’ll just be tagged in tweets forever and ever. And you’re like ‘no, I’m not getting involved with that’”

Broadly, journalists spoke about there being little “value” in many social interactions online now, apart from when they need to contact someone or if they get tip-offs and ideas for stories; the idea of genuine “engagement” with the public was minimal; as mentioned in Section 5.2, many suggested it was a waste of time. There was **some resentment evident towards any expectation that these kinds of interactions need to be part of the daily life of a contemporary journalist**, with one pointing out how “I haven’t gotten extra bonus payment so I can take abuse from non-entities on Twitter”. Another explained how it is not only the “abuse”, but just the general negative culture and “wearing you down”:

“Why do I have to pay attention to these people? Like do I want to put myself in the position where I’m hearing from these people who are just going to have a go at me, or my work? And I think increasingly the answer is no, because why would you choose to do that? ... It just feels like we all have so much going on in our lives to have to prioritise and that is actually important. And then the idea that we somehow are expected to have the bandwidth or the headspace to deal with the noise, the chatter from people which is not positive, it’s not constructive.”

5.7 Switching off – forever?

There was a relatively even split between those who said they would remain on social media (particularly Twitter) even if they were no longer a journalist, versus those who said they would prefer to get of it as much as possible. The ones who had had the most experiences or who had simply reached a point of fatigue with the dynamics of online interactions were the most likely to say they would not use it if they could, whereas others reinforced many of the positive aspects of it, and suspected it would be a nicer experience to be present in these spaces without being a journalist. For many of the reasons outlined earlier regarding the professional expectations, the overarching sentiment, as captured in one journalist’s assessment, was “I think as long as I’m a journalist, I will have that presence”.

Based on the journalists’ descriptions and reflections on what had happened online, there was often a general pattern emerging, conceptualised in Table 4 as “five phases”. This is a composite of many journalists’ experiences and does not capture everyone, nor is there any suggestion that all journalists go through each phase on some predetermined path; many come into journalism or a particular workplace with some attitudes and perspectives already in place in terms of their mindset, and each journalist’s approach is clearly shaped by the specific journalistic role (format and subject matter in particular) in which they work.

TABLE 4: FIVE PHASES OF JOURNALISTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL MEDIA USE

<p>Phase 1: Eager and enthusiastic</p> <p>Journalists are new entries to the field. They do not have a huge follower base, and typically don't encounter much negativity about their work. They are optimistic about the value of social media for promoting their work and reputation, and for finding stories and contacts.</p>
<p>Phase 2: Growing in status</p> <p>They become more prominent as early-career journalists with an increasing profile and growing following numbers. As a result, there is an uptick in the level of hostility coming towards them. This can be overwhelming and impactful as they have little experience in dealing with this kind of content.</p>
<p>Phase 3: Well-known and targeted</p> <p>Journalists are established in their careers and very familiar with the various forms of negative material that are sent their way. They have developed the proverbial "thick skin" and suggest they are so used to it that it does not phase them much anymore. They frequently block and minimise interactions.</p>
<p>Phase 4: The tipping point</p> <p>Something specific happens, or there is a period of such intensity, that the situation crosses a line in their minds. For some, this was a ramped-up onslaught online in the aftermath of a particular story, a highly personal attack on themselves or their family, or physical encounters that held a potential "real-life" threat. They start to seriously re-evaluate their social media use.</p>
<p>Phase 5: The withdrawal</p> <p>Journalists at this point are broadly exasperated: not with journalism, but with the dynamics of online interactions and the effect they have had on them. They remain committed to journalism, but take a very functional, utilitarian approach to social media, using it if they must for particular tasks and where they see tangible benefits. Some will not use it at all anymore and – as they are established in their careers – are not as dependent on it for finding sources or promoting their own work.</p>

5.8 Ongoing commitment to the role

There was broad consensus that the journalists' experiences had impacted their approach, activity and goals for using social media. These shifts in behaviour varied from person to person, often informed by the scale of the negative encounters. Toward the end of each interview, each journalist was asked a similar question: "Would your experiences online ever impact your willingness to stay in journalism?" For many, there was a clear commitment to the sector, regardless of what they had encountered:

"Not for a moment. No. Never. It never would make me question it. Journalism is an amazing career. It's stressful and it can be a pain in the ass and you can hate it from day to day but ... I feel extremely lucky to do what I do. That would never make me question my career."

Some described a refusal to allow people who they did not respect to have any impact on their career: "I love my job, there's certainly no question of ever stepping away ... It would take a lot more than a few trolls to be doing that." One journalist admitted that she had questioned her job at times, given the scale of criticism she faces, but articulated her defiance and commitment in the context of the social role that many journalists strove to fulfil, pointing out "I didn't ask to be famous. I didn't go on *Love Island*. I didn't go on *X Factor*. I don't want to be famous. I am doing a f*cking job. A job. It is also a public service." Another also drew on this rationale, pointing out that the democratic function that journalists serve, coupled with her professional ambitions, shine through for her:

"When someone tries to intimidate you, do you just say 'fine, I'll stop doing what I'm doing?' Why? You're not doing anything wrong. You're putting facts out into the world. You're highlighting how our government is spending your own tax money. Like, you're not doing anything bad, you know? So why would you back down just because someone's decided they don't agree with you or they don't like you? No, I think it's important work and I don't want to step down from something that I've spent years and years and years working towards, because one person decided to take their frustrations out on me on a certain day. No, I'm not going to do it."

Some journalists felt provoking a reaction was simply part of their remit and "if you're not p*ssing someone off you're not doing your job right". Another suggested that sometimes her peers can get too wound up over the negative content they receive, and "journalists have to learn maybe a new skill set, which is how to not be so sensitive about it and just accept it as part of the job and block". The idea that the online interactions are just part of the job which has to be waded through in order to get to the fulfilling part was the consensus among the interviewees, even if they were aggrieved, frustrated and fed up that this component of their work existed. Some explained that even though grappling with online reaction was especially difficult in the first years of their career, it never put them off doing their job, as this sports journalist – now involved in broadcast – explained:

"[Earlier in my career] if I was ever asked to go on video, I kind of shied away from it, but that changed ... I was like 'okay, look, cop on. I studied for four years to be here' ... I never had any negative interactions with any journalists, players, nobody in the industry ever gave me any type of crap. And I was thinking, well, they obviously know I deserve to be here. So I shouldn't let the internet deter me because this is something I've wanted for a long time."

Others felt some journalists sometimes placed too much value on social media and needed to realise that, in terms of measuring the impact and value of their work, social media is "not really representative of the general public". They believed it to be overly critical which is not how the majority feel, or how they think or behave: "I think we can get wrapped up in the bubble sometimes and maybe not see it for what it is." Another articulated how the negativity she has encountered "hasn't made me question my job, but it has made me question my use of social media. I think there's definitely scope to separate the two. You can be a good journalist without being online". Elsewhere, many articulated a resentment regarding the influence that social media platforms – and often a professional expectation to be present – have on themselves, their colleagues, and their day-to-day reporting and sharing of stories: "I wish it wasn't a part of the job. I wish we could just do stories and just the stories magically get out to the audience somehow. That would be great."

// 6. SOLUTIONS

6.1 Social media companies

Journalists reported four main issues regarding the social media platforms' approach to handling content which they believed to be untrue or abusive. Some noticed improvements in recent years on Twitter specifically but – as these interviews took place in mid-2022 – had concerns about what might lie ahead under Elon Musk's takeover. The main problems identified were:

(i) Slow response to reports made about posts/user accounts: Interviewees gave various anecdotes about how they had reported troubling content through the suggested channels but were too slow to get a response. This was the main complaint across the interviews. "It's such a drawn-out process and it takes a lot to get something taken down that may be harmful or offensive." Some pointed to improvements with graphic imagery or reports that were under certain categories (such as anti-Semitic), but defamatory posts could be "up for days" or never taken down at all. Some wished that in the intervening period between their complaint and the moderation decision being made, that there was some curbing of the offender's account or the temporary removal of the post while the review is taking place. "That person has done something. There has to be a process blah blah blah. I just think that there should be a simple, 'this account has been reported. It has been suspended. We're going to look back over the track record.'"

(ii) Threshold for removal is too high: When a decision was made, many journalists were left frustrated as posts they reported were deemed not to have breached any guidelines, suggesting a high threshold: "[If a user says something unacceptable] that's abusive, it's derogatory, it's X, Y, Z. Then the moderators come back and they're like, 'no, no, that's fine'. Like 'that's a perfectly perfect thing to put on our platform'." Some journalists linked this to a US-centric model of moderation "and their approach is so much about free speech and the hands-off stuff or whatever" which does not align with global audiences, and particularly Irish or European perspectives.

(iii) Intervention, inconsistency and contacting someone "higher up": Following a slow or unsatisfactory outcome as above, some journalists described examples where a resolution was eventually reached – but only by going up to a higher level in the companies than the standard moderation teams. One reporter explained her frustration that nothing was happening with a particular user targeting her: "[My organisation] went to a higher level within Twitter to make some formal complaints about the abuse their journalists were receiving. We ended up bringing the issues into a senior person on Twitter and they immediately said, 'oh no, this is a problem we need to take these down'. But the more junior staff, who do really important work, obviously the guidelines they've been given told them that this is not a problem." The ability to "contact someone higher up" was possible among journalists in Ireland because of the companies' HQ offices and management teams having a presence here, coupled with journalists having the professional contacts to get in touch – not something feasible for most users.

(iv) Reactive approach: Many journalists wished there could be a more pro-active approach from the platforms, such as increased verification of accounts, identifying and removing accounts that are only used for spouting abusive content or targeting others, limits on the number of accounts people can have, some called for proof of ID (which others resisted), or not allowing posts or messages with certain words to be sent/shared in the first instance. "They could be doing a lot more to monitor what's happening rather than just being reactive because, I do feel like it's unfair that the people who were the victims of the abuse have to do so much work in order to get something taken down."

TABLE 5: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL PRACTICAL FEATURES ON PLATFORMS

- Ensuring people cannot “quote tweet” your posts if using “limited replies”.
- The ability to limit interactions or replies from people who had only recently joined or had low numbers of followers, or who had other “flags” on their account.
- Providing more information about the accounts that are found to have breached the guidelines, so journalists can find out, for example, what country they are based in, as “knowing who is behind any threats is important”.
- Not allowing content with certain words to be sent to them in the first instance.
- Not verifying profiles on Facebook without the journalist’s consent, as happened to one interviewee when her personal account became “verified” without her knowledge, still with her personal details/photographs fully visible.

Regarding the existing features, many participants found the “Message Requests” (which functions as an initial filter on messages if their DMs are open) was helpful and, as discussed, the block, muting and limiting replies functions were appreciated. Some other suggestions for specific features to be offered to users are included in Table 5.

More broadly, many journalists took issue with **the lack of consequences** for people who engage in the kind of criticism and hostility outlined here, suggesting there are few disincentives for people who do carry out these kinds of attacks online. One sports journalist compared it to commentators at a match and what is deemed acceptable if an incident occurs in a stadium or on a broadcast:

“Say I’m doing a live radio at a match. If somebody runs up and shouts something at me, there’s a good chance they’re removed from the press box and they don’t get to come back again. Whereas if that happens on social media, the same interaction, the same thing is said, the consequences are not the same. So that’s actually what allows the behaviour of people to do things that are wildly inappropriate because they know there’s no consequences whatsoever.”

Some journalists highlighted the different standards which mainstream news outlets are held to compared with social media companies, with one saying the latter were not simply neutral platforms but “they are the publishers of what’s being said, so they do have the responsibility”. She argued that if it was easier to take legal action against the companies – like it is against news organisations – then “they would clean up their own act, because they’re about money”. Another contributor pointed out that even properly moderating comments about court cases was crucial: for example, those cases with an underage sex abuse victim, where someone in the the comments could include photographs of the alleged perpetrator which could risk identifying the victim. This journalist explained: “That’s horrifically upsetting for the victim. It shouldn’t be allowed to happen either. They need to give legal training to their moderators.” There was an overarching sense that the companies which established and control these platforms had an obligation to do more to protect users: “They weren’t monsters when they created them. They were amazing communication tools and they’ve turned into monsters and they haven’t figured out properly how to control them.” There was particular attention granted to the fact that many of these companies have European headquarters in Dublin and, overall, journalists were frustrated with the generally passive approach they take toward content moderation.

6.2 Employer actions

When asked about what employers could potentially do to help with the situation online, various journalists pointed out that it was impossible for employers to ever curb the negativity completely or stop people making insulting comments, and some insisted the onus should be on the technology companies. Nevertheless, many pointed out some areas in which there is the potential for improvements from within the newsrooms themselves.

“Although social media has been around a long time, it does feel like it’s still breaking new ground and people don’t really know what is appropriate or what they should be telling their employees is appropriate or is not appropriate”

Some felt the problem was that many managers or senior editors had worked as reporters in an era before social media so “they may use it or they may monitor us on it or whatever, but they don’t understand it”, or cannot grasp how it is intertwined with many journalists’ daily work. Coupled with that is how quickly things can change in the social media landscape, with different platforms and communication channels/structures in flux. Most reported a sense of encouragement to be active, or mentioned the “understanding” that

they would be sharing updates, primarily as a means to attract as large an audience as possible. As one described it: “There was a certain push to have some sort of presence, but I can’t say it was overwhelming”, but many noted it probably varied depending on the news organisation. Yet some journalists spoke with some uncertainty about whether posting on social media was actually a formal part of their job, beyond feeling the “pressure” or expectation, with one raising questions about her obligations in this regard:

“In my contract, am I beholden to tweet, to be on social media? No, I’m a TV reporter, but arguably it goes in part and parcel as your job. [But if] they’re not asking you to formally be on social media, is it part of your job? So are they supposed to support you [if problems arise]? I just don’t think they know what to do themselves.”

A younger journalist explained how she wanted more conversations to take place around what repercussions – if any – there would be if she did decide to delete all social media, while another contributor had a glimpse into such a scenario. After going through a difficult period in her personal life she temporarily deactivated her account. She was questioned by a colleague about whether she had told their superior that she was no longer active and “it was actually said to me that basically they weren’t happy that I wasn’t on social media”. She told the colleague it was temporary and explained her reasoning but wondered whether she should have had to reveal these personal details, suggesting “it would’ve been interesting if I’d pushed back a bit and left out the [details] and just been like, ‘oh, I don’t want to use it.’” Some other contributors mentioned this freedom to be present or not – and it being up to the individual journalist – as one of the simplest but most valuable things an employer can do: “If a journalist wants to come off Twitter or doesn’t want to use social media to promote their work, they have to support that.”

Participants often described how many **existing social media policies** – if such policies existed at all – fell short as they appeared to focus on three areas which were peripheral to the hostility aspect. Firstly, many of the formal guidelines or training they received emphasised the journalists’ overall conduct online such as keeping opinions to themselves, not swearing and – as is discussed further below – no interaction with “trolls”. One noted how “we have a social media person who comes

down pretty heavily on people who are perceived to be tweeting things [the organisation] don't want out there". Secondly, there was an emphasis in many newsrooms on ensuring the story or breaking news element was sent back to the newsroom and on the editorial system before it was "being given away for free" throughout journalists' social media posts, which had caused some resistance from reporters. Finally, sometimes **management appeared to focus only on the more promotional or marketing function of social media**, whereby journalists were trained on sharing certain kinds of posts, what hashtags to use, and how to promote their stories online, or the social media team were there to simply maximise engagement and traffic. One explained that she found this "irritating" that they were trained in "how we should be representing the company, but nobody has done anything about saying what to do when we're abused?" Another added that this distinction between promotion of stories and the actual reality of daily interactions on social media is regularly overlooked:

"I don't think enough training is done in social media at all. And I think it's kind of a laziness because it's kind of felt that, well, 'there's a social media team. They sort the social media. They put up the posts, all those things'. But actually we all have to run our own social media accounts because we're doing it all the time with our work. And some people are more savvy with social media and also some people are more impacted with the pushbacks that come through social media."

The number of participants who described any kind of pro-active training to help to prepare journalists for some of the challenges what might lie ahead, was minimal with the majority feeling that any discussions and support in the newsroom came only as a *reaction* to a specific incident or wave of negativity towards journalists (such as during Covid-19). Another – who had some managerial experience – explained some of the key points they try to get across to staff: "Here's who to talk to; don't tweet your location; don't get involved, step away from any fights or any abuse or anything like that; here's how to report things to the Gardaí; here's how to report things to your editorial team ... just making sure that people see it as a place where look, bad things can happen." Elsewhere, one company had surveyed its journalists about abusive content, and some participants did notice an improvement in recent years, saying they now had a clear "step-by-step guide", including procedures such as blocking the person and notifying the line manager as soon as possible, who might then pursue it with the legal team if necessary. Yet this was rare, and many participants suggested that clear guidance and training would be very helpful:

"Ironically, we are in the communications business and sometimes we can be some of the worst communicators ... even a bit of sign posting. I would love there to be someone that I know that I can go to, just even to know who to speak to and get advice from, and ask: 'Is this actionable? Is this something that I should be contacting police about? Has it got that far? I don't know what to do here.' So I would love someone in my workplace to know what to do."

This participant had a particular "real life" issue where she felt she had been monitored online and followed, but ended up not reporting it to anyone in the organisation because she did not feel the structures or awareness were in place for her, and she was unsure if it was "serious enough".

When specific incidents did happen, there were mixed responses from participants about the workplace support they received. For some, it was very positive: they recalled colleagues who defended them in public arguments about their work online, while co-workers and managers

checked in on them if they noticed something particularly problematic online. Conversely, some also pointed out less-than-helpful reactions. One described the “stoneyfaced” response when managers heard about a particular encounter she had, while another recalled having to relive some of the messages she had received following a backlash from fans over something she had written about a podcast. In this instance, although she said her editor had been supportive and checked in on her, he requested that she send him screenshots of some of the comments she had received, even though she had stopped reading through them herself because she knew she would get annoyed or upset looking at them.

“I remember my editor actually brought me into the office at the time, just being like ‘are you ok about this?’ Because I was only actually new enough to the job at that time. And it was the first time I’d experienced abuse like that or threats like that, I suppose. So, yeah, it was scary”

“Then to have to screenshot them and send them to him was like ‘ugh’. I didn’t really want to do that. They made comments about my appearance and for some reason, I was like ‘I don’t want him seeing that.’ I know that’s stupid because he could have seen them. But I felt like that was nearly bringing it all up again and I felt embarrassed even though I had no reason to.”

In contrast, another who was involved in a “pile-on” of negativity following something she had covered spoke very positively about how, alongside the calls and checking in, an external third-party company was used to gather all the social media content and document/analyse them so “all that was taken off me, so that was brilliant”. This outside company was able to provide her with a summary of what was said about her and how supportive people actually were for her, and reviewed it for any defamatory or legally pursuable material. She described the relief of that: “That was huge – that I didn’t have to monitor everything. Anything that I needed to know, or they thought I should know, they would call me.” Another described a designated social media officer in her workplace who was appointed to support journalists with these kinds of encounters.

In terms of day-to-day encounters, one journalist highlighted how **tagging the journalist** in the original post from the news organisation’s account when sharing brought an additional burden which was not really discussed openly in the newsroom. This practice of the tagging the journalist brought the post on to their radar – and, therefore, their devices – which impacted in three ways:

- (i) It increased the magnitude of different interactions which the journalist had to filter through;
- (ii) Many interactions were people arguing about the story, which the journalist was then getting notified about and seeing all that negativity, which could also be targeted at them;
- (iii) It drew direct attention to the journalist’s account making them easier to identify and contact, which is not necessarily a beneficial thing. One described how she had been tagged in one of her outlet’s posts on Instagram – which she had been using in a personal capacity – and as a result then had to switch her account profile settings to “private” because the organisation’s post had drawn unwanted attention to her, leading to people accessing her non-work-related posts.

The idea of “**ignore, don’t engage**” was promoted by many outlets in an attempt to curb the risks associated with journalists getting dragged into arguments and possibly to protect them in that manner, with some pointing out how they are “not allowed” to respond, with editors advising them to disengage from particular encounters. Some appreciated this stance and these interventions, but

this approach was problematic for others who felt that they should have the freedom to respond if they wanted to, in particular to defend their reputation if claims are being made against the journalist or the story which are factually incorrect:

“I’ve seen some of my colleagues reply to these people and, and say, ‘this is not the case and that’s not true’. Because if we leave it to go unchallenged, then sometimes by not challenging it or not replying to it looks like we’re accepting that we’re wrong.”

One journalist pointed out the inconsistency that if journalists are being instructed not to argue back, then it creates an information and credibility gap: “We’re entitled to defend our reputation. And our employers are telling us not to – and yet they don’t have anyone out there battling for us.” This point was echoed by some others who wished there was more visible support for them and their colleagues by senior staff and the organisation rather than believing that complete disengagement and ignoring the content was the solution. Many appreciated the personal “solidarity” they received from colleagues – even outside their own workplace – but wanted their organisations to “stand up for [journalists] a bit more”, both in visible online spaces and through tangible supports such as legal action where appropriate. Some of the journalists reported that their news outlets had engaged with the technology companies directly to try to tackle the level of hostility coming towards their journalists, but of course not all actions were known to the journalists so it is not possible to comprehensively evaluate that route.

Table 6 outlines some of the key recommendations for employers in terms of general training and preparing journalists, how they best respond when something does happen, as well as general suggestions about day-to-day usage which could improve their journalists’ work-life balance. Although these would not solve the actual problems – which are more within the social media platform’s remit to address – they could still help journalists in a meaningful way and show recognition and validation for their experiences and some of the additional burdens they carry when active online. Other points raised by participants regarding their employers’ approach to social media included:

- Too much attention being granted to the small cohort of active users on social media, and Twitter especially given its relatively small user base.
- Frustration that instructions are sometimes given to reporters to cover stories that were gaining prominence on social media, even if the journalist had already covered it or explained why it did not warrant further attention.
- The challenge of balancing an individual’s freedom to express themselves and their opinions on certain matters with the fact that colleagues in that newsroom will often be associated with that person and it could affect how people perceive them.
- The failure of employers to recognise the burden in the same way that other stresses of the job are acknowledged. For example, working late hours, working overtime, or early mornings. One noted that “all of those have been taken into account as part of your employment that takes its toll on you”, through additional financial payment, reductions in working hours or periods of leave.
- Ensuring that in organisational responses (such as statements) to any criticism online, they are not just defending the outlet’s editorial approach, but defend the journalist too.
- Over-reliance in the newsroom on the most visible experts on topics, such as housing or cancer: “Do we rely on those people as experts just because they are tweeting 10 times a day and we know their name? ... there may be actually far more articulate or better experts out there, but just because they’re not on Twitter, their views or, or their considerations are not maybe echoed in the media.”

TABLE 6: POTENTIAL ACTIONS FROM EMPLOYERS

Be pro-active and effectively prepare journalists	Handle incidents when they occur and react appropriately	Implement policies around day-to-day social media use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Ensure clear pathways and a clear contact point in each newsroom → Sectoral approach and training as part of industry groups initiative → Guidance on separating private and work accounts → Training that distinguishes between promotional/brand work and support for journalists using it → Have regular meetings (3-6 months) to discuss experiences and changes in landscape and new elements to be aware of → Collaborate in some form with Twitter/Meta to create better understanding of tools, resources, dangers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Take seriously and do not dismiss it when journalists come with concerns → Have a way to publicly support and defend a journalist's reputation in social media spaces → Support with legal action assistance if appropriate → Have an outside person/organisation to review any abusive material rather than expecting the journalist themselves to do that → Offer time off or counselling support if needed, and recognising the burden that this can take on people depending on their experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Reconsider the "ignore, don't engage" approach if reputations are at risk and journalists want to respond → Discuss with journalists whether or not they should be tagged in posts, on what platforms, and when → Do not put pressure on journalists to have/keep their own personal social media accounts → Ensure contracts are clear on what is expected re: social media outputs and what hours/days journalists should be active. Consider additional time off/bonus payments for those active on social media → Provide/encourage use of separate work phones, if requested by journalists

6.3 Policing and legislation

Among the journalists who had been involved with risks or threats, there was an underlying reluctance to pursue it with the police for one of two reasons: (i) they did not want to escalate it and give it more attention, and preferred to downplay it and believe that things would eventually settle down, or (ii) because they feared that reporting it would make no difference and the officers would not be able to help them in any meaningful way. It is worth noting, though, that two of the women whose experiences were at the more serious end of the spectrum in terms of receiving sustained, problematic content, spoke very positively about the support they received from the Gardaí in Dublin. For example, one described how she expected it to be a "dead end" and for them to be "difficult" and reluctant to investigate, but this was not the case as the Gardaí were more aware of the criminal elements to it and were very "pro-active":

"I'd actually advocate more people going to the gardaí about the bad stuff that happens ... I don't think that there's enough awareness of that, of the fact that the guards are looking to take these kinds of cases. So I feel very strange defending the Gardaí this much, but yeah, they were very good. I think more people should make use of them."

Some also noted the new Garda tool for reporting hate crime, which included "obscene/offensive calls, text, mail or emails, assault, harassment", but none spoke to its efficacy, while another

explained how she had a specific sergeant assigned to her as a main contact point because of her history with dangerous and problematic incidents.

Regarding government action, interviewees were asked if any potential solutions stood out to them. Many pointed out the challenges in trying to limit what people say online – “it seems so complicated because people can hide behind a screen and say whatever they want and like, how do you really, you know, legislate to stop that? – and felt that it was effectively an impossible task to stop the content from happening in the first place, although technology companies could do more. Many noted that hostility and abuse, especially towards women, is an all-too familiar problem also facing legislators and some journalists felt politicians were affected even more because of the public nature of their roles.

“I think journalists can hide to a certain extent. Politicians have to be public-facing all the time”

The global nature of the problems was also highlighted, with some suggesting that the EU level might be the most realistic venue for reforms. There was acknowledgement of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill and the Online Safety Commissioner in the Republic of Ireland, but understandable uncertainty about what, if any, difference it would have for journalists in the long term, especially since legislators had been “slow off the mark” in the eyes of some. Others suggested that, considering so many companies have headquarters in Dublin, the Irish government could and should be applying more pressure, especially as the technology companies have seemingly failed to make meaningful substantial changes. One said: “There needs to be some sort of government intervention [where] they say “if you cannot keep people safe, then you can’t operate here”, with some participants suggesting monetary repercussions as one of the only things the companies might respond do:

“Of course [the government] could get stricter. Of course they could. Of course they could bring in legislation, but things move so slowly here ... giving these companies a rap across the knuckles or bringing them into an Oireachtas committee every now and again, and saying ‘you should do more’, it’s water off ducks back to them. [There needs to be] legislation that has teeth, that they could be fined and hit them where it hurts or other sanctions if they don’t do more to protect their spaces and protect people that use their spaces.”

There were calls for legislators to apply pressure on the companies to tighten up their procedures around reporting abusive content, and to respond more efficiently and with a more hands-on approach if somebody does complain, as mentioned earlier. However, some felt the social media companies were lobbying the Irish government and pushing to ensure there are fewer restrictions and regulations in place, an issue also at the EU level: “Look at the amount of resources that the big technology companies are putting into lobbying in Brussels because they see a day coming when there will be regulation.” Some sought efforts to regulate the anonymity of accounts, but others acknowledged the tension with people’s right to privacy, while one respondent felt professional adults receiving nasty comments paled in comparison to concerns about child safety online and that more government attention is needed there. Elsewhere, another pointed out that in many ways government reform on defamation laws would actually ease journalists’ lives in a broader and more meaningful way because “you write something and the next minute you’re brought back down to earth with a legal letter the next day. ... And even though everything you’ve written might be true and factual, people use defamation legislation to get at you, intimidate you, threaten you.”

// 7. PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NEXT GENERATION

For the second component of this project, 40 journalism students (male and female) in Dublin City University, NUI Galway, and University of Limerick participated in five focus groups. Just like the professionals, many journalism students described the positive aspects of social media and how it can benefit their work, drawing on the benefits such as contacting sources, finding story ideas, and monitoring what was happening in their local area. Nevertheless, a feeling of pressure and anxiety was common, echoing and anticipating many of the concerns raised earlier in this report.

7.1 Pressure to be present

Students had, on the whole, internalised the idea that they needed to have a social media presence to work in journalism: some resisted or resented this, but most felt it was simply an expectation: “I think it’s nearly something you have to do now, it’s just part of it.” Some suggested it was lecturers in their university courses had encouraged them to have active accounts, while others felt it was an industry-level expectation evident in job adverts and interviews, where social media was mentioned as a requirement.

“[News organisations] would want you to be a bit more than just: ‘This happened today. And that happened today’. They want you to be kind of almost innovative or something just a little bit different. Maybe to make you more employable but just to make you more valuable.”

The students’ own “employability” was clearly a concern, and some spoke about the benefits of having a social media presence which they articulated through the lens of self-preservation in an increasingly precarious industry. There were suggestions that a social media following may not be essential, “but it would never set you back”, while another pointed out that it is up to students to try to highlight their own value online when applying for jobs: “If you don’t promote yourself, who is going to do it then?” The unstable nature of work is understandably to the fore of their minds, given the well-documented instability of the sector, and some felt that building a following online was a means to protect themselves or at least maintain some kind of control:

“It’s like a lawyer when they’re leaving their company: ‘I’m taking all my clients with me’. If you work for The Guardian, and you were made redundant tomorrow, and if you’ve got no followers, you’ve got no base to go with you. It’s becoming increasingly important to have a specific brand and a specific personality to almost ensure personal continued career trajectory.”

Furthermore, the perception of being involved and on top of timely developments was associated with being part of the “conversation” online about breaking news in your area of expertise, and how it could look “like you’re behind the crowd”. Conversely, though, some students resented what they saw as the now-standard “professional” identity template of many journalists online – “you need to

look a certain way on Twitter, like your photos need to be a certain way, your profile needs to be a certain way". This apparent pressure to be present and performative was troubling for those students who wanted to be judged on their work, rather than their identity or image:

"Is that just gone, the right of the journalist to be an unknown? Do you have to have a picture? First it was a picture beside your name and now it's your whole life in your social media or your professional one on your LinkedIn. I feel it is impossible to be a journalist and just do your job and not have anyone know everything about you."

Overall, there was a clear sense of pressure in terms of how they presented themselves – as one said, managing their social media identity as a young journalist was "another stressful thing to add to the list", with the anxiety coming from thinking about how both the public and potential employers would respond to their online profiles.

From a labour perspective, students also raised some concerns about how the lines might get blurred if they felt like they were unable to digitally disconnect at the end of the working day and instead had to keep an eye on updates around stories they had been working on, or stay on top of the day's issues. This was a very real concern and resonates with the points made earlier about journalists' often feeling an inability to "switch off" when their shift finishes or on days off.

"You'd be scrolling till 11pm. But, are you getting paid for that? That's scary. I don't want to be recruited as a digital media journalist, and then they tell me, 'these are your hours', but ... you have to keep up, to check social media, and they don't pay for the extra four or five hours a day"

7.2 Negativity already encountered:

Despite being in the early stages of their career, many students described negative encounters they had already experienced because of their journalistic work, or even the fact that this is their chosen career path: "People do have an opinion when you say that you're studying journalism." For some, there was a clear disconnect between their own idealistic motivations in pursuing journalism work and the public reaction they were facing online, where anti-journalist sentiment was commonplace in the post-"fake news" era in which the media and journalists' motivations were openly and repeatedly called into question.

"That kind of perception that you always have an ulterior motive, that you're not just writing a story to get an important issue out there, like there's some kind of vested interest that you have. And it's that lack of trust that is a bit jarring especially when you come at with a story from a place of sincerity. I think you definitely see the most scrutiny online."

This "jarring" is indicative of a clash of the student's ideals when it meets public perception, and the anti-journalist sentiment they get from others. One student lamented how "it's so hard to get things right" as people online are so quick to criticise, even though "I'm only a student journalist, I'm only learning ... if you slip in any way, and even if you don't slip at all, people have something to say about it."

The student journalists detailed some examples of the negativity they had encountered online, even at this early stage of their careers, such as:

- A student writing about sport, whose work was screenshotted and doctored, and re-posted in a comment underneath his original post, suggesting he had written something he hadn't.
- Two female students who had both set up social media accounts as part of a module assignment, and were providing updates on a local council meeting. One described a message from an older man, estimated to be in his 60s, that said something like 'I can give you money if you want, you don't have to do all this work.' The other detailed a message she received: "I got one message from some guy, he was like: 'Hey, beautiful lady.'"
- Negative Facebook comments underneath a story which they had published in a national outlet about their Leaving Cert experience. They had been unaware the work was posted to social media account and the comments came as a shock.

While much of the conversation centred around online encounters, there were some concerns about who might be "watching" and gleaning information about you which could be used in an offline context. One undergraduate student described how she writes for her local newspaper but "I just get so much abuse about it. People taking the p*ss, people just... just being horrible". She described people mocking her and calling her names based on the publication's title, and articulated how this is a burden for a teenager/young adult to have to manage. She described one incident she suffered when she was out socialising:

"I remember one night, it was horrible. Someone had a photo of one of the articles I wrote, it was a photo of me. And this lad just walked up to me and was like: "What the f*ck is this? What are you doing with yourself?" And it's horrible - I feel like I can't go out. I feel like you're always being just watched."

Even at this early career stage, it appears that any kind of increased visibility – which is typically the target for many students trying to build a portfolio of work and garner experience – can cause problems which many feel ill-prepared for. Another student described how, because of previous work they had completed on Travellers which had garnered some national attention, it had led to an initial, immediate backlash from some contributors online, which then translated into "real" life encounters the following week. The student was faced with hostile questions and interrogations about Travellers' behaviour which they were in no position to respond to.

7.3 Witnessing hostility towards professional women journalists

Alongside the general anti-journalist sentiment which many students observed online, the focus group participants did reflect on the gendered dimension and how women are generally more adversely affected. This can happen, as one pointed out, "as soon as they start to get any kind of popularity, they just come under fire from so many people". There was some pushback from some male participants but the groups were broadly in agreement that the language and messaging targeting women had a more aggressive, sexualised and threatening undertone.

For many male students, seeing how high-profile women in sports journalism and sports punditry were treated was eye-opening. They noticed commentary online suggesting the women's presence on panels was simply a "box-ticking exercise", which they found frustrating and ignorant, given

"I think on a digital sphere, the kind of reaction women can get ... with men it can be like: 'I don't like what you said', and then with women, it can be like: 'I'm gonna murder you'. Oh, Jesus. When they say: 'I stalked your social media, and I know where you live', and you're like 'Oh, God'"

the experience and knowledge of someone like Alex Scott, the five-time English Premier League winner: "Some of these women have been playing the highest level of the women's game – they know more than any random guy on Twitter." The questioning of women's expertise in certain fields was commonplace, with one male student suggesting "it's sexually motivated as well, which I mean, as a bloke, that just doesn't happen; but again, it's the kind of patriarchal society and constantly putting women down." Another male student described how he had written something about a potential football club takeover which had garnered a lot of negative comments underneath: "I got loads of abuse from people saying like they're gonna flog me and all this kind of stuff. But there'd never be anything sexual based, whereas I think for women, there's always that undercurrent."

While the exposure to such hostile content online was valuable for the male students to highlight the problems facing women journalists, it is also worth considering how this can impact female students' interpretation of the risks that may lie ahead for them, and perhaps how it could impact their willingness to take on those risks:

"I think even seeing how just women in the media are treated on social media. There was that woman [BBC reporter Sonja McLaughlan] who interviewed the England rugby captain Owen Farrell after he lost, after the team lost. She said: 'Are you really disappointed?' And he was like: 'Listen, I don't like these questions'. Then everyone [online] was like 'you're a stupid b*tch' to this woman. What is she supposed to do? Why's she getting so much hate when I've seen male journalists do that?"

Witnessing high-profile women facing this kind of reaction was clearly a deterrent for some of the students, with them also pointing to high-profile political journalists, such as Laura Kuenssberg in the UK, facing a lot of negativity on social media platforms. The pressure around appearance was also a factor for the female students, with some remarking how they will likely avoid video and television work because they know how people always comment critically on how women journalists look and "I couldn't handle that". Students pointed out how they had witnessed minority groups – Travellers, other ethnic groups, and those involved in LGBTQ+ issues – also attracting negative attention.

7.4 Self-censorship?

Many students felt confused and constrained in their social media identities, concerned about what happens them if they make a mis-step of some sort. One student described his "irrational fears that I could get cancelled for something", later explaining how, every week, he checks back over what he has "liked" on social media to ensure he hadn't accidentally engaged with "something problematic" which could be used against him in future. The majority of students remarked on the current norms of polarised online culture in which people were hastily targeted and "piled on" for any kind of deviance, which was leading many students to a form of self-censorship and withdrawal from participation. Coupled with this was a sense that much of the reaction and conversations were somewhat ill-informed or irrational.

"The internet is very unforgiving and making a single mistake can cause incredible backlash. Mis-wording something or mis-attributing something or not considering something. Because on Twitter, you see all the time someone being like: "I like this type of chocolate". And then, there's like a fight breaks out because that means you hate this other kind."

Another aspect of this self-censorship was the concern about whether potential employers would judge the students for their online conduct, and they were unsure what they could or couldn't be posting. One example, mentioned by two female students, was Social Democrats TD Holly Cairns' Dáil speech for International Women's Day in 2022, which came in the aftermath of Ashling Murphy's death.

"I was going to retweet it. But then I was like: 'I don't know if this is [seen as] a political affiliation?' And then, while I'm applying for jobs, it's going to be like: 'Oh, she's a big Social Democrats' supporter. Whether I am or not, I just liked the speech. Then I feel like I have to put more thought into that kind of thing, and be a bit more careful about what I post and think a lot about it. And as a result, I don't really post very much. Because if I'm not sure, I just won't do it. And I'm never sure."

The students were highly attuned to the perception of their professionalism and knew potential employers, and the public, could take issue with some of what they posted. Yet beyond the political opinions or social values, some students lamented the dual identity they were balancing: still being a young student, but being perceived as being part of the journalism sector. One questioned how this impacts on them posting about any aspect of their lives: "Does that mean that if you want to be expressing your own views then it has to be a private thing? What if you want to tweet funny things and you happen to be a journalist? Are the two... Can you not do the two? Maybe you can't."

This sense of self-censorship is triggered by the students' having witnessed what can happen to journalists, or others, who attract negative attention online; there appears to be an element of self-defence in taking a step back, as seen with the professional journalists. Of course, if women are seen to be impacted more with more hostile, sexualised and aggressive messaging, this may impact female journalists even from the student level, given they are exposed to the experiences of high-profile figures in the media. For some students, the silencing of their voice is seen as a way to make themselves less objectionable to both the public and potential employers, yet somewhat collides with the students' own perception of a social media presence as a valuable platform for career advancement. Furthermore, the question arises as to who can advance their career opportunities through profile-building online if certain segments of young journalists, such as young women, feel the safest route is to hold back, stay quiet, and turn down opportunities to avoid attention.

7.5 Seeking guidance

When asked what might help them learn to navigate social media, students suggested:

- News outlets speaking out more about attacks on their journalists.
- Pro-active approaches from social media platforms to reduce hostile language and attacks on journalists. Students broadly support increased interventions and barriers to posting on social networks (eg, proof of ID).
- Universities providing training on online conduct and highlighting the negative sides. Input from professional journalists, giving advice on managing public profile and interacting with audiences.
- Advice from editors about what are "acceptable" personal details or opinions to share that do not jeopardise a student's professionalism.
- Self-care workshops for journalism students on how to deal with negativity.

The following section provides advice for student journalists, gathered from the project's more experienced interviewees.

// ADVICE FOR STUDENT JOURNALISTS

Each journalist was asked what social media advice they would offer young student journalists. These points arose in the broad context of handling negativity online, so many focus on dealing with the negative aspects rather than the positive potential of social media platforms. The following list of recommendations was collated by three journalism students in DCU, Liam Coates, Kim Morrissey and Andrew Walsh, who read through all the responses and gathered what they thought were the most valuable and relevant pieces of advice. These are presented below in a shorter version, but a more extensive exploration will be available in a separate PDF online on the doras.dcu.ie website.

1. Try to remain **impartial and objective** on social media, especially for news and current affairs. Otherwise, your opinions could colour people's perception of your reporting. *"Anyone can have an opinion, but I think once you're a journalist and you stick to reporting the facts and the story and letting the story do the talking for itself, that's just a better option and a better way to go."*
2. Consider which of your social media accounts are set to **public vs private**, and check the privacy settings to align with your chosen audience (ie, friends and family/everyone).
3. You should expect, as your profile builds, some level of **online abuse**, which can be exacerbated by posting about your private life. *"Err on the side of caution with how much of yourself you put out there, because it can come back to bite you."*
4. Don't be afraid to **ask for support** with online harassment. Your colleagues and employers have more than likely experienced something similar in the past. *"Don't sit there and suffer in silence and think it's you."*
5. Sometimes it is good to **engage in a healthy debate** online. Healthy debate is a good quality that social media enables between journalists and their audiences.
6. **However, don't engage with pointless negativity** online, with people who just *"want to have a public display of arguing with you, abusing you and making a fool out of you"*. Familiarise yourself with filtering options on each platform.
7. Try not to get **stuck in an echo chamber**. Following accounts you don't agree with can broaden your perspective.
8. Twitter can be a great tool for finding stories, sources, and networking, but it's important to **take time away** and distance yourself when you're not working.
9. It's important **not to be overly reliant** on sources from social media. *"People waste so much time on social media, especially journalists. On Twitter, when they could be picking up the phone and ringing people, instead of looking for someone else to report it on Twitter."*
10. Try not to jump on a viral trend and retweet something before **verifying** it. *"You just need to pull back a little and think 'I don't really know what the story is there. I don't know what's going on. I haven't heard both sides of the story and maybe that's not a trusted news story.'"*
11. Think about **what type of profile you want to create**, because potential employers and the public may research your past social media interactions and posts. *"I think people forget how there are people out there that will go back over previous tweets from years ago and they will use it against you."*
12. **Don't feel pressure** to have a significant social media presence. For a few journalists, they find they don't feel pressure to post as part of their job. *"It's just a tool and a way to access information and interact with people if you want to. And if you don't want to, then no. I think people would be fine without it as well."*

// 8. CONCLUSIONS

There is no single model of online hostility among women journalists in Ireland, and the 36 contributors to this report expressed mixed attitudes and experiences. It is misleading to suggest that every journalist who has encountered any kind of negativity is a victim of online abuse or sees themselves as such: the stronger sentiment coming through the interviews was that their negative social media interactions were simply one aspect of the job, and often the worst, but did not at all define their role and core professional identity.

The report's findings began with the positives of using social media and those should be celebrated; the opportunity to engage with others, easily monitor what is happening and find ideas and contacts for stories is invaluable. The speed at which social media facilitates these interactions allows journalists to perform to a high level and remain relevant in a competitive environment, especially those working as general daily reporters. Nevertheless, a darker undercurrent exists online which few journalists can escape, and which is now interwoven with their work. This is not always outright abuse or harassment, nor is it always on social media: the many methods of easy exchange with audiences – direct messages, comments under articles, emails and even in person – all raise problems. Overall, the participants' accounts illustrate a stream of negativity, name-calling, undermining, criticism and attempts to chip away at their professionalism and confidence. This can be coupled with extreme physical threats, intimidation, "pile-ons" and worryingly aggressive, sexualised, or obsessive content and behaviour. Not all journalists experienced all of these, but it is indicative of what is happening and normalised in the Irish sector. Based on the interviewees' experiences, it appears the hostility fits into 15 overarching categories, as outlined in Table 7.

TABLE 7: 15 TYPES OF ONLINE NEGATIVITY ENCOUNTERED BY JOURNALISTS IN IRELAND

1. Unwanted casual sexual/"romantic" propositions.
2. Aggressive or sexually violent language or images.
3. "Pile-ons" based on certain topics/posts, or stories where they are the target or criticism for a few hours/days/weeks.
4. Threats for their safety or intimidation from people involved/mentioned in the story and their acquaintances.
5. Targeted because of their perceived identity, ideology or values, such as for religious, sectarian, ethnic or party-political reasons.
6. Anti-journalist sentiment and insults, with accusations of bias or purporting "fake news".
7. Challenging and undermining the journalists' professional knowledge and expertise.
8. Constant critiquing and "correcting" of things they have posted with minor observations.
9. "Shooting the messenger" and being the target because of the subject matter or the story.
10. "Tainted by association" and being criticised because of the outlet they work for and/or colleagues' previous reporting on a topic.
11. Remarks about their appearance, voice, mannerism, clothes, make-up, jewellery, etc.
12. Deliberate lies or misinformation appearing online about them, such as fake profiles.
13. Filming/photograph on-street incidents and circulation/ridiculing online.
14. Frustration expressed toward the journalist when news coverage is not as sources/subjects expected because of editorial decisions beyond the journalist's control.
15. Criticism for supposedly "ignoring" stories and tip-offs that they have been contacted about.

Depending on the specific details, and the attitude and experience of the journalists involved, the content they encounter will impact them to a more or lesser degree. For many, the line was crossed from essentially claiming they are “not bothered” to it being more impactful when the attacks became more personal rather than being a criticism of their actual reporting. Many of the participants could recall one or two particular incidents which had stuck with them because it was such a personal or worrying attack and remarks, something about them and their home/family life, or because it was a tipping point in terms of how they reconciled their wellbeing and safety with the risks of having an online profile and active social media use.

8.1 Shifting over time

As they reflected on their relationship with social media platforms, many journalists described how they had gradually withdrawn and consciously presented a detached version of themselves with a very functional tone and approach. The consensus was that they had put an increasing amount of space – whether that was the time they gave, or actual filters and barriers offered by social media platforms – between themselves and the public. Through their use of some of the filtering options available, such as blocking, muting, limiting replies, and open/closing direct messages, it was clear that journalists were trying to re-assert some level of control over the flows of content and their interactions. That is not to suggest the experiences they described did not impact them or their wellbeing, but the filtering practices they described were presented as a clear and pragmatic means to deal with the problem and move on. Furthermore, many were considered and mindful of the reasons *why* they were taking these actions, and the potential implications for journalist-public interactions, while also being aware of the perception of their actions and the public expectations of journalists and their social, democratic roles. There was a constant awareness of their role as contactable, public figures and how a balance is struck with their own personal boundaries.

Other dimensions also have a personal impact, such as the emotional burden of being so easily contactable by people who have upsetting personal stories to tell, but who the journalist cannot possibly always accommodate. The challenge of properly “switching off” – and the many additional hours of work tasks that overflow in the fluid social network/smartphone era – further blur the boundaries and have implications regarding contractual obligations, recognition of additional hours worked, and what is reasonably expected for journalists when they clock off. Many understood that journalism was never a 9-5 job, but noted the boundaries which they had once had pre-social media were eroding with little acknowledgement or recompense for the additional challenges brought about by negative online interactions.

8.2 Solutions and recommendations

As section 6 outlines, the journalists identified various ways in which technology companies – and legislators applying pressure – could help with the challenges they encounter regarding the threatening, harmful or defamatory material. These can be addressed through bigger, ideological reconsiderations, such as what should be deemed harmful content worthy of removal, or minor changes and additional tools which can help journalists manage streams of content. While most journalists suggested that social media companies had the biggest obligation to protect users, there were also some important points for employers to consider. This is particularly pertinent given the increasingly metrics-driven and visual turn in journalism towards video/images whereby journalists may be more exposed than ever before, and the fact that social media is a valued dissemination tool. There should also be clear newsroom policies in place in terms of procedures to report problems, and journalists should feel like their employers understand the magnitude of how social media impacts their work – and their lives – each day. The broad message was that employers expecting journalists to be active and visible must be mindful of the consequences, and especially

grasp the increasing burden on women. Furthermore, journalists who do not wish to be active should be respected and not pressurised. Key recommendations from Section 6 are reiterated below.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES:

1. Respond more quickly to reported posts and re-evaluate the current high threshold for what content warrants removal.
2. Aim to *prevent* more harmful content, such as through better monitoring and verification of users, rather than taking a slow reactionary approach.
3. Provide additional filtering options which may be useful for journalists.

NEWS ORGANISATIONS:

1. Ensure there are clear pathways and supports in place so journalists know where to go if any incident of this nature occurs.
2. Training that acknowledges risks for journalists on social media, with guidance on how to separate public/private accounts, rather than employers just focusing on social media as a publishing/marketing tool.
3. Have clarity with workers on what is expected of them in terms of their professional social media profiles and how their additional time/work spent in online spaces will be recognised. Also discuss and agree what posts/when they wish to be tagged/included in, and on what platforms.

LEGISLATORS:

1. Ensure meaningful monitoring of the objectives and aims of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill. This should be done in a manner that will be pro-active and sensitive to the particular challenges for journalists and be part of broader reforms that will also tackle defamation laws which currently facilitate persistent legal threats against journalists.
2. Apply pressure on social media platforms to make changes and address the safety of their users and consider penalties, like fines, if regulations are breached.

8.3 Repercussions for women in journalism

In a project filled with troubling anecdotes and reflections, there is one positive: the participants' apparent commitment to sticking with journalism and not allowing this aspect of their job to stop them from reporting and telling stories. They might be keen to take a step back from social media, but not from journalism; this distinction in the minds of many participants cannot be overstated. Furthermore, there was repeated reference to the gender dimension with journalists noting how visible, vocal, competent women always triggered a reaction online; there was a defiance among many participants to continue their work, regardless of the reaction.

Nevertheless, if employers push for active social media accounts from their journalists or potential employees, it shifts the goalposts regarding what it means to be successful and an asset to a newsroom. There has always been "added value" with high-profile names who attract audiences but it now appears that such expectations of profile and visibility are trickling down, hitting younger recruits particularly hard. If there is a "withdrawal" phase among women journalists because of negativity online, it raises questions as to who fills that space and whether a vocal presence online – be that male or female – becomes a more "valuable" and "strategic" choice in recruitment, promotion, or is even factored into redundancies. Journalists in this study spoke about how that is already evident in terms of additional exposure opportunities and producers seeking contributions from those most vocal online. Most managers would no doubt insist that their priority is simply good reporters, and it is possible for journalists – especially those with decades of experience – to still thrive without using it. Yet the fact remains that many journalists now perceive a shift in what is seen

as core, valuable journalistic traits, and therefore they feel that extra pressure to adapt to ensure they remain “relevant”, whatever the consequences might be.

Women have historically been underrepresented in Irish journalism in numbers and seniority of roles. There has been some improvement in recent decades, but the influence of online culture and negative interactions could be a deterrent, causing a regression in women’s voices, presence, and influence in journalism. Serious, committed female reporters who take a step back from being visible on social media may find themselves professionally disadvantaged. Even when they are visible, there is an additional layer of pressure regarding their appearance or their “warmth”, bringing further scrutiny that many might feel is simply not worth the hassle. Pulling back, staying quiet and avoiding conflict is not unique to women journalists in Ireland but this silencing effect is worrying for anyone concerned about women in media, let alone their broader participation in society.

“I stay very reserved on social media. I rarely express an opinion because you do not want the backlash. So it does have a silencing effect on people, on women”

The student perspective included in this project supports many of the main findings. Even at this early stage, some would-be journalists have already experienced negative interactions based on their career choice, aware of the challenges for women and minority groups in particular. For both the experienced journalists and the students, witnessing how high-profile women journalists are treated serves as something of a warning of what happens if you put too much of yourself out there, and the dilemma arises in how you balance that with the professional expectations to be present. Young journalists being deterred before they even get properly started is undoubtedly concerning for the future of the sector and how it might look in a couple of decades’ time.

8.4 Limitations and future research

This study was motivated by the desire to capture the experiences of women journalists in Ireland. This is not to suggest that only women, or only journalists, encounter negativity in online social spaces; what is presented here is simply one element of what can be a troubling and hostile environment for many. This project’s scope, therefore, means it is not possible to fully grasp the different experiences of male and female journalists, and future research would benefit from a holistic approach to comprehensively explore the anti-journalistic sentiment and how it manifests for all journalists. Capturing the challenges facing journalists from minority backgrounds would also be useful: although touched on here, there is great potential to explore those additional barriers.

Future research would also benefit from more comprehensive understandings of journalists’ attitudes towards their outlets’ social media policies and the extent to which they feel it infringes, or not, on what they wish to post. This was touched on incidentally when discussing employer responses, but there are interesting points to pursue regarding journalists’ ability to defend their reputation, let alone their desire to share thoughts and experiences which may not directly align with the company’s desires to exert control over their journalists’ social media activity.

Finally, beyond journalism, there are important broader conversations to be had regarding how technology companies have engaged – or not – with large organisations or sectors whose staff have faced ongoing hostility online, be that news outlets, political parties, policing bodies or other state or high-profile institutions. What happens in the Irish context is particularly important considering so many platforms have headquarters in Dublin and broader international policies can be shaped by events and precedents set here. The extent to which the platforms and their decision-makers respond to concerns and serious incidents towards certain targeted cohorts of users is among the most critical junctures in the current communications landscape.

Further reading:

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