

New Zealand newsrooms saw the rise of ‘mob censorship’ in 2023, as journalists faced a barrage of abuse

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New Zealand consistently ranks well in global monitors of democracy, media freedom and open government. But high rates of abuse and threats directed at journalists put us at risk of “mob censorship” – citizen vigilantism that seeks to discipline journalism.

Our recently published study documents newswriters’ experiences of abuse and violence at New Zealand’s largest news organisation, Stuff.

The research reveals just how widespread online and physical abuse towards journalists has become – and how this is changing the news and who is covering it.

A ‘festering heap of toxicity’

Not one of the 128 journalists and visual journalists surveyed was untouched by abuse, threats or violence related to their job, most commonly delivered via work email on a daily or weekly basis. One respondent described her inbox as a “festering heap of toxicity”.

Women journalists bear the brunt of online abuse, primarily related to their gender or ethnicity (53%) and physical appearance (32%) (such as “ugly bitch” or “Pakeha ugly c***”), compared with 20% of men.

Attempts to discredit them were also reported by 45% of women as opposed to 34% of men. All threats of sexual violence captured in our survey were made towards women.

Overall, men tended to experience more “offline” threats (44% compared to 23% of women) and actual physical violence (16% men compared to 12% women). Nearly 40% of all those experiencing physical violence were visual journalists, showing up to photograph emotionally-charged events such as accidents and protests.

When we further analysed our findings by ethnicity, it was our small subset of Māori women who reported the very highest rates of offline threats and actual violence. These journalists represented the intersection of both gender and ethnicity – increasing their likelihood of being a target of abuse.

Targets for writing about race

As well as capturing the high levels of abuse and threats directed at Māori women journalists, our survey documented ways in which the content of news itself was at risk from mob censorship.

Simply writing stories about race or racism triggered abuse for the writer, whatever their actual or perceived identity.

A self-described “white-passing Māori” explained how, after reporting on the dawn raid apology, she received messages calling her things like “white apologist bitch”. Several Pākeha

women were abused as racists or traitors for using te reo Māori in stories or writing about racism.

While a handful of male journalists reported abuse in the vein of “pale, stale, male” – an equally unhelpful development – it was much more common for male respondents to observe greater levels of abuse directed at female colleagues for writing similar stories.

Read more: Campaign trail threats and abuse reinforce the need to protect NZ’s women politicians – before they quit for good

Extensive and detailed reports of gendered abuse provide clear evidence that simply being female puts women journalists at risk in New Zealand, as it does elsewhere.

One participant wrote that “comments about being female are pretty much the common thread of all toxic messages I’ve received” – a pattern that Stuff journalist Michelle Duff has argued was “designed to silence”.

Several women said they turn down opportunities to write opinion pieces. As one said, “I just cannot believe the feedback women get if you express *any* opinion”.

Similar patterns have been documented by journalist Charlotte Graham McLay. Unsurprisingly, a good proportion of women journalists (22%) contemplated leaving the profession, compared to 4% of men.

But abuse affects all journalists, at least indirectly. Some 71% of our participants adjusted their online behaviours, including closing social media accounts, and 24% indicated they had consciously altered a story. As one person said, “there are [controversial or divisive] stories I’d be less likely to pursue”, including to protect vulnerable sources.

Accepting abuse is not the answer

More than three-quarters of our respondents considered abuse and threats to be just part of the job. There was, though, concern this feeds a “dangerous” and “outdated” professional culture that shuts down frank discussion and causes anxiety.

One female reporter who had experienced on-the-job violence wrote of being “extremely worried” that she or a colleague “will eventually be singled out by an extremist to be attacked or killed”.

Read more: [Online attacks on female journalists are increasingly spilling into the 'real world' – new research](#)

Some journalists in our study saw value in responding to abusive emails from readers. As one respondent said, “once I engage with someone (generally) they are apologetic and start interacting like a normal human being”, and exchanges “have morphed into positive experiences for both parties”.

But this emotional labour is an additional burden in under-resourced newsrooms.

Furthermore, some participants were sceptical about the extent of employer commitment to addressing the problem, given the adoption of branding practices such as publishing photo bylines and email addresses, which tended to ramp up online abuse.

Muted watchdogs

Globally, the news industry hasn’t done a good job of training, supporting and protecting its journalists in the digital era.

Research from the United States suggests that receiving regular abuse entrenches journalists’ “us versus them” mentality. This deepens the rift between news organisations and the communities they serve, fuelling mistrust.

Clearly, democracy itself is undermined by any intimidation or disincentive that stops journalists from performing their watchdog duties.

Supporting journalists to do their jobs as safely and free from abuse as possible needs to be the industry's top priority for 2024. It's vital not only for them, but also for our democratic future.

This article was written with the assistance of Dr. Catherine Strong, a consultant journalism educator and former journalist. Strong is editor of the American academic journal Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication.

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