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# An Intersectional Analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand Journalists' Online and Offline Experiences of Abuse, Threats and Violence

Susan Fontaine<sup>a</sup> and Cathy Strong<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Communication, Journalism & Marketing, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand;

<sup>b</sup>School of Communication, Journalism & Marketing (former affiliation; now retired), Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

## ABSTRACT

Criticism towards journalists has increased significantly since the internet created easy and anonymous communication and has turned more abusive and threatening in recent years, becoming a regular feature of journalists' work environment, particularly for women. This article presents survey data about the amount and nature of online and offline abuse, threats and violence experienced by journalists at Aotearoa New Zealand's largest news media company, Stuff. All respondents had experienced abuse, violence and/or threats, which they widely considered to be part of the job, but women received more identity and appearance-based abuse and men experienced more in-person threats of, and actual violence. Gender plays a part in how the journalists cope with the abrasive abuse received because of their job, with many more women and particularly Māori women considering leaving the profession. In line with calls for more intersectional analysis of journalists' workplace experiences, our study considers the complex and nuanced ways that ethnicity intersects with gender to shape Māori and Pākehā journalists' encounters with abuse, threats and violence. For instance, our subset of Māori women journalists experienced the highest rates of offline threats and violence.

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## Introduction

Journalists have long been on the receiving end of violence, threats and antisocial behaviours, across multiple channels and from various sources, but the growth of digital and social media has created circumstances spawning new forms and increasing the scale and pervasiveness of abuse. Such robust organisations as UNESCO (2022), Reporters Sans Frontieres (2018) and media freedom groups like the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2023) present evidence that digital threats towards journalists are growing, increased during the Covid-19 pandemic and are associated with the killing of journalists in at

**CONTACT** Susan Fontaine  [s.l.fontaine@massey.ac.nz](mailto:s.l.fontaine@massey.ac.nz)

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least some nations. Democratic countries where news media are traditionally judged free and independent are not immune to these trends (Miller 2021; Nilsson and Örnebring 2016) and in fact, Anglo-democratic nations may be the new vanguard in a post-pandemic world characterised by a rise in populism and misinformation and erosion of trust in institutions including the mainstream media.

One clear example of this is Aotearoa New Zealand, a small settler-colonial democracy in the South Pacific, which consistently ranks well in global monitors of democracy, media freedom, gender equality, safety and security, personal freedoms and open government (Gillespie 2022). However, despite Aotearoa New Zealand's egalitarian culture and robust journalism tradition, anecdotal evidence indicates the country's journalists are not immune from the global increases in abuse directed at newswriters, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic and associated civil protests (Peacock 2021; UNESCO 2022). Although Aotearoa New Zealand also has a gender-balanced journalistic workforce (Fountain et al. 2021), high-profile journalists and presenters, particularly women and those who identify as Māori, have spoken publicly about the online abuse they receive as part of their jobs (Graham-McLay 2017). These accounts usefully draw attention to a worrying trend, but they may not be indicative of the experiences of general news staff, for as Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020, 1062) note, "prominent journalists with large followings" are not representative of most newswriters. However, the latest Worlds of Journalism Study indicated that about two-thirds of the 359 Aotearoa New Zealand journalists surveyed are "experiencing demeaning or hateful speech sometimes or often, with over a third experiencing it often or very often" (Hollings, Whelan, and Borissenko 2022, 9). Similar results were reported for public discrediting and "small but concerning numbers had experienced more serious threats", including surveillance, hacking and sexual assault or harassment, with the latter "almost exclusively a problem faced by women journalists" (10) in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This article presents the findings of the first local survey of Aotearoa New Zealand journalists specifically concerned with online and offline experiences of abuse, threats and violence. Drawing from a sample of staff at the nation's largest news media organisation, Stuff, it presents data from 128 journalists, analysed with respect to gender and indigenous Māori ethnicity. It thus makes a valuable contribution to the currently limited research using an intersectional lens to analyse the abuse directed at journalists. The following section outlines the indigenous cultural context informing our approach to intersectionality.

## **The Cultural Context of Aotearoa New Zealand**

Aotearoa New Zealand was colonised by the British in the eighteenth Century, with the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) signed between the Crown and "tangata whenua", the indigenous people of the land (now collectively known as Māori), in 1840. The Treaty's key principles of partnership, protection and participation provide the base for Aotearoa New Zealand's biculturalism but in the decades following its signing, Māori were dispossessed of land, resources and culture, resulting in increased social and economic deprivation and marginalisation (Mutu 2019). Prime Minister Keith Holyoake's much touted claim, in the 1960s, that New Zealand had the best race relations in the world would soon be challenged by the Māori renaissance, which since the 1970s

has revitalised indigenous culture and language, transforming the political landscape through, for example, the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal to redress land confiscations and recognition of te reo Māori as an official language in 1987 (Derby 2023; Godfery 2022).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this transformation has not been universally welcomed by Pākehā (e.g., Cumming 2004). Māori currently make up 17% of Aotearoa New Zealand's population of 5 million while Pākehā (a Māori term which refers to Caucasian New Zealanders, many of who are descended from the predominantly British and European colonisers) currently comprise around 70% of the population. A 2019 survey of diversity and racism in Aotearoa New Zealand identified "an undercurrent of resentment from Pākehā against a Māori renaissance" (Broughton 2019) and recent government attempts to formalise co-governance of natural assets have led to "political fury" and "violent rhetoric" (Madow 2023). Backlash, particularly in the form of attacks on so-called "Māori privilege" and the increasing profile of te reo, has become increasingly apparent online (Blair 2023), often directed at journalists (e.g., Kino 2019; Te Rito 2022) and mainstream media organisations (Triponel 2021), including public radio. For journalists who publicly identify as Māori, write stories about racism or issues such as co-governance, and/or use te reo in their reporting, reader feedback can be negative and abusive (Graham-McLay 2017; Kino 2019). Thus, the contemporary environment presents particular safety issues for Aotearoa New Zealand journalists reporting on political and social issues.

## A Global Picture of Abuse and Harassment of Journalists

Over the past 20 years, as digital and social media have transformed media practices around audience interaction and engagement, anti-social online behaviours (and their apparent acceleration) have been consistently documented by journalist organisations, human rights agencies and academics. A survey in 2017 found 40% of 940 European journalists had experienced "unwarranted interference" (defined as acts or threats to physical and moral integrity), over the previous three years, sufficient to affect their personal life (Clark and Grech 2017). A 2020 survey of a representative sample of US journalists found "nearly all journalists experience at least some online harassment" although this was deemed to be infrequent overall, particularly in its more extreme iterations (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020, 1047). A 2021 Ipsos poll of Canadian journalists showed 70% had experienced harassment in the previous year (Bundale 2021) and most believed that the nature of cyberbullying was worsening. These findings are similar to earlier survey data from Sweden (Nilsson and Örnebring 2016) where 74% of journalists had received abusive comments in the previous 12 months. Australian data from 2022 show that almost a third of journalists had been threatened online in the previous year, with the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) report also documenting many examples of online abuse and 92.5% of those surveyed concerned that such abuse was increasing (Dobbie 2022).

Rates of both abuse and threats tend to be higher for journalists with profile and visibility. Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020) concluded that "the strongest predictor of online harassment was journalists' level of personal visibility" (1058–1059), and perhaps unsurprisingly, journalists working in broadcast media, especially television, report the highest rates of harassment. In Sweden, profile and visibility are also associated with

photo bylines in tabloid and morning daily newspapers (Nilsson and Örnebring 2016) and in Aotearoa New Zealand, women hosts on popular morning radio programmes experience gendered abuse (e.g., silly girl, stupid bitch) on a weekly basis (Graham-McLay 2017). Certain news specialisations are also linked to abuse and threats, although this varies from country to country: in Sweden, crime reporters received the most threats and, along with foreign affairs and sports reporters, the most abuse (Nilsson and Örnebring 2016); at Britain's *Guardian* newspaper the highest rates of blocked comments occurred in stories on sport, technology and film (Gardiner 2018); in Taiwan, pro- or anti-China stances in political reporting led to higher levels of cruelty and abuse for women reporters than men (Pain and Chen 2019). UNESCO's 2022 study suggested that "heightened online attacks were most often in response to work on the subject of gender" (22).

Much of the literature supports the notion that women journalists across many different countries receive a disproportionate chunk of online harassment even as they remain under-represented in most of the world's newsrooms. Comparative research has documented distinctly gendered patterns in the abuse of journalists, which is mostly directed at women and with a misogynistic tenor. *Guardian* articles written by women attract a significantly higher rate of "blocked" comments (i.e., deemed abusive) and its women writers are especially likely to be abused when reporting on topics dominated by male writers (Gardiner 2018). Miller's (2022) study of US journalists showed that "women experience harassment ... significantly more often than men" (8). Harassment of a sexual nature was significantly more prevalent among women, as were "incivility and disruptive harassment" (8). In Switzerland, women journalists were significantly more likely to be attacked on the basis of gender although not more likely to be physically threatened (Stahel and Schoen 2020). Miller's (2021) synthesis of research into online harassment of journalists summarises workplace experiences as "gendered, violent, and threatening" (2), with a chilling effect on content and negative implications for the way journalists perceive their audiences. One of the few comparative studies to buck the trend, in Sweden, found abuse was more commonly reported by men (80%) than women (72%), with no gender difference in the experience of threats; however, its authors still identified a "misogynist discourse" (885) in comments directed at women journalists, with a third of female participants receiving "sexist comments in which bitch, slut, and whore are common invectives" (885) and threatened with rape and sexual violence. The consistency of the broad finding that many women journalists receive abuse, that they experience more abuse than their male counterparts, that this abuse has a gendered component and is more often at the severe end of the scale, if not necessarily more violent or threatening, is remarkable.

## The Impacts of Harassment, Abuse and Violence

As well as documenting the extent and nature of harassment directed at journalists, many survey and interview studies ask newswriters about the impact of threats and abuse on their work and personal behaviours. A range of personal protection measures have been documented, such as home and personal alarms, filing police reports and use of coping mechanisms such as exercise, alcohol and talking (Miller 2021; Nilsson and Örnebring 2016). There is evidence that notable proportions of those targeted

consequently change aspects of their reporting. For example, a quarter of Swedish journalists who had received threats subsequently avoided reporting on certain topics or groups and 10% considered leaving the profession (Nilsson and Örnebring 2016); in Australia, online abuse has also led women journalists to self-censor (GEV 2019). Among US journalists, the “most common response was to change posting behaviours on social media (46.4%), followed by stopping engagement/posting with a social media account (33.2%) and reporting or flagging content posted about the journalist 32.0%” (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020, 1060). Female journalists express a stronger likelihood of leaving the industry, adapting their reporting behaviours and limiting audience interactions—a pattern Stahel and Schoen (2020, 1850) summarise as “self-selecting out of the public sphere”. A study of Australian journalists’ views on using resilience training to address online abuse suggests the potential of this approach to “address gender differences through more mutual, peer-oriented strategies of workplace caring” (Martin and Murrell 2020, 105). In Miller’s (2022) study, many women expressed a belief that harassment is strongly linked to their gender, resulting in “an unconfounding interpretation of harassment as the price women pay to do journalism” (14; see also GEV 2019; Graham-McLay 2017), which may also dent women’s enthusiasm for entering and staying in the profession. Indeed, Stahel and Schoen’s analysis suggests women journalists’ avoidance behaviours are linked to their heightened stress response to online attacks.

The impact of harassment on journalists’ attitudes towards the audience has also been scrutinised. Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020) posited that US journalists who are repeatedly harassed “take a dim view of their audiences” (1062), tending to see them as less rational and less like them, and expecting fewer quality interactions. Public accounts of abuse from high-profile journalists may plausibly discourage other journalists from interacting with audiences—a bystander effect with implications for journalism practice more widely (Lewis et al.). While avoidance tactics which lessen journalists’ exposure to abuse are a pragmatic response they inevitably impact career progression at a time when building an online following or brand is widely expected by media employers. An important strand of this literature examines the role of the employer in preventing harassment and supporting affected staff, putting the spotlight on the changing nature of news, newsroom cultures and the media ecosystems which arguably contribute to online toxicity. Most surveys capture at least some failings in news organisation practices, industry training (e.g., Miller 2022) and support (e.g., UNESCO 2022), with calls for closer examination of managers’ roles in enabling abuse through their branding practices and better interrogation of industry and organisational “duty of care”. Indeed, writers such as Holton et al. (2021) and Miller (2021) argue that the range of prevention and coping mechanisms is rooted in industry stigma about reporting harassment and failure of media organisations to adequately support their staff. This has further implications for the already well-established under-representation of women in senior newsroom positions, which risks becoming a vicious cycle when male-dominated leadership fails to grasp women journalists’ different experiences with harassment (UNESCO 2022) or to recognise the consequences for mental health and job performance (Miller 2022). In a policy document produced by Gender Equity Victoria (GEV 2019, 7), journalists identified “systemic sexism” as contributing to the absence of strong leadership on the issue of online abuse towards women journalists.

## Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Research Questions

As the literature above shows, women journalists are those primarily oppressed by harassment and online violence. Our study, informed by intersectionality theory, “asks the other question” – that is, how any “dimension of inequality is itself subdivided and crisscrossed with other axes of power and exclusion” (Choo and Ferree 2010, 135). Intersectionality recognises that race or ethnicity and gender do not independently shape identity and lived experience but work together (and indeed, with other variables such as class, sexuality, religion, age and physical abilities) to privilege and oppress individuals and social groups in complex ways (GEV 2019; Valencía-Forrester et al. 2023). For example, Erkmen et al.’s (2023) study of women journalists in Turkey captures “a triple discrimination stemming from the intersecting structures of patriarchal power over women and political oppression against both Kurdishness and being a journalist” (858).

While criticisms of intersectionality note its vague conceptualisation, preoccupation with visual rather than unmarked difference and simplistic adoption by White Feminism in ways that undermine its original transformative potential (Carastathis 2016; Choo and Ferree 2010), we use it here because it enables us to explore the complex interactions of gender and ethnicity which contribute to abuse and violence in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand journalism. This is particularly important given Miller’s (2021) review of studies about the harassment of journalists identified the influence of race as a clear gap in the literature. The limited work that does engage with both gender and race shows that “media workers who are women, Black, Indigenous, people of colour and part of the LGBTQ2+ community reported facing harassment more often – and to a greater severity” (Bundale 2021; see also Gardiner 2018; Waisbord 2020; 2022). Posetti and Shabbir (2022) found 81% of Black women journalists experience online violence compared to 64% White women. Further, a UNESCO-led study, which surveyed 901 female journalists from 125 countries, indicated 73% had experienced “some form of online violence”, 20% had experienced associated offline attacks or abuse, and that “harassment was compounded with multiple stereotypes and prejudice related to ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation/gender identity” (2022, 21). Similarly, the impacts of gendered online abuse are “amplified” for Indigenous women in Australia (Valencía-Forrester et al. 2023).

We thus pose two research questions in our study: what are the experiences of newswriters in Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest news organisation with abuse and violence? How are these experiences shaped by gender, ethnicity and the intersections of gender and ethnicity? In addressing these questions we add to global knowledge about abuse and threats directed to newswriters in different national settings, while also providing the sort of localised, grounded understanding of context called for by intersectionality theorists and required to advance meaningful solutions (Waisbord 2020; 2022).

## Method: The Survey and Stuff

This study employed an online survey with a combination of multi-choice and open-ended questions, generated by Survey Monkey and assuring anonymity to the respondents. Surveys, along with interviews, have been widely used to establish the extent and nature of journalist harassment. Most studies rely on self-reporting, employing

industry or professional organisation datasets comprising various types of journalist and media outlets (e.g., broadcast, online), or using snowball sampling to identify interviewees (Miller 2021). There are few common definitions of associated terms or the boundaries between types of abusive and harassing behaviours. Miller suggests “a relative consensus” around using the word “harassment” to describe the “unwanted behaviours” directed at journalists (3) though we elected to use the word “abuse” in our survey as it better reflects the parlance of Aotearoa New Zealand journalism (e.g., Graham-McLay 2017). Published studies include varied numbers of participants and achieve markedly different response rates, although often with representative samples. For example, Nilsson and Örnebring’s survey of Swedish journalists in 2013 was “largely representative” (883) with a participation rate of 76% and in a small but representative survey of US journalists, Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020) reported a response rate of 8.4%.

Stuff is Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest news media company and one of two main providers of print and online news. The overall organisation employs about 1000 people across its various digital and news platforms (roughly 320 newswriters) and is locally owned since 2020. Stuff.co.nz is the country’s most visited news site, and includes content from many of the company’s highest circulating metropolitan, provincial and Sunday newspapers (Hope et al. 2022). Of particular relevance to this study is the organisation’s proactive efforts around reporting gender and Māori news, with two significant ongoing editorial projects: #metooNZ, an investigative project launched in 2018 and spearheaded by Alison Mau; and Our Truth: Tā Matou Pono, an investigative history project, edited by Carmen Parahi, which launched in 2020 following Stuff’s historic apology to Māori for decades of racist and monocultural reporting (Taylor 2020).

The survey questions were drafted by the authors in November 2021 and refined slightly after pre-testing and meetings with Stuff editors. The survey topic was primarily defined for participants as being about uncomfortable online comments directed towards them personally and was thus concerned with participants’ perceptions rather than any independently defined criteria of abuse, threats or violence, a similar approach to that used by Nilsson and Örnebring (2016) and advocated by Miller (2021). Given connections between online and offline abuse and harassment (UNESCO 2022), the survey also invited participants to record instances of physical violence and in-person threats. A low-risk ethics application was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Notification 4000025160). A Survey Monkey link was shared via Stuff staff email in December 2021 with the tool and all survey data solely accessible by one researcher (the second author). This yielded 128 responses and a respectable response rate of 40%.

The survey was a series of multiple-choice questions, with space for comments, asking respondents for demographic descriptions, their journalism position in the organisation, extent of online activity, and experiences with abuse, threats and violence, plus their coping mechanisms. Respondents were asked if they believed any online abuse they received related to either their physical appearance, or their gender, race, sexuality or religion. More than half the respondents commented on each multiple-choice question and nearly a third added comments at the end of the survey. This material was analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative analysis, where the authors both located illustrative examples guided by the extensive research around women journalists’ experiences of abuse and were led by the data and our intersectional framework to identify new dimensions of experience.

The open-ended survey question about ethnicity drew a variety of terminology, some of which is commonly understood as having similar meaning (e.g., Pākehā, New Zealand European, New Zealander, Kiwi). Fifteen (12%) of participants identified their ethnicity using 11 diverse descriptors (e.g., South African, Chinese, Indian), which defied meaningful analytic categorisation. Because using such individualised descriptors would also risk identifying particular “minority” journalists at Stuff, we elected to focus our ethnicity analysis around Pākehā and Māori. While this seemingly binary approach has limitations (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007), it does reflect, respect and protect the chosen identifications of our participants while also enabling close analysis of the often overlooked experiences of indigenous women in Aotearoa New Zealand journalism.

Although Survey Monkey software provides a statistical analysis of the multi-choice responses, this project also conducted a manual regressive statistical analysis of the total results, as well as each sub-category or question. Because of the small number of answers in each topic it was unnecessary to calculate a *p*-value. The statistical results were reviewed by both authors, and after interrogation and discussion we used the raw data to calculate further results and review each survey response holistically to identify patterns not captured by aggregated data.

## Results: Journalist Profile and Online Presence

More than half of respondents (76 or 59%) had worked in journalism for more than 10 years with only 5% having worked in the industry for less than two years; the bulk of respondents (56%) were aged 30–49 years. There were slightly more women respondents than men (73 or 57%; none identified as transgender), and 99 (77%) identified as Pākehā or New Zealand European (or similar; see method) and 12 or 9% Māori. Three quarters of the Māori respondents were female. Our demographics are consistent with the most recent profile of local journalists, which suggests 58% of Aotearoa New Zealand journalists are women and 10% are Māori (Hollings, Whelan, and Borissenko 2022).

Nearly two-thirds (77 or 60%) of the respondents nominated general news as one of their main rounds, with sizeable chunks of respondents also actively reporting on Covid-19 (31%), crime (25%) and social issues (23%). Of particular relevance to this article, 18 (14%) indicated they report on Māori and ethnic affairs, and 15 (12%) were visual journalists.

Unsurprisingly, respondents indicated making use of the internet to research stories and locate sources but less than a half used any one social media platform on a daily basis and the single biggest category of use for each platform was *seldom*. Most respondents (111 or 87%) were at least occasional users of Facebook, 104 were on Twitter and 96 used Instagram. The relatively modest use and, in some cases, reported abandonment of social media platforms pointed to self-management of time, privacy concerns and mental health. For some journalists who indicated closing or seldom using an account, this was explicitly motivated by negative experiences e.g., “I post way less on Twitter these days, because I find it anxiety-inducing and scary” (Pākehā female). One Māori woman had closed accounts specifically because of racism. Two female journalists, one Māori and one Pākehā, explained other changes they had made:

I had multiple death threats and abusive comments via Twitter after a story was published ... it was traumatic as people also attacked my children ... I stopped using Twitter for nearly a year afterwards ... changed my username.

I used to have my Twitter account in my real name but closed it and opened one under another name after copping work-related abuse on there ... I also changed my name on Facebook and Instagram after being tracked down there – sometimes at 2am – by angry readers.

This summary of our participants' online presence and behaviours provides an insight into the context of our study and hints at some of the abusive, threatening and violent experiences subsequently captured in their responses.

## Frequency and Nature of Abusive Messages

Not one respondent to this survey was untouched by abuse, threats or violence related to their job, most often delivered via their work email. Nearly 90% of Stuff journalists reported receiving abusive, toxic or uncomfortable messages via organisational email, nearly a third (29%) of them on a weekly basis, another 11% on a daily basis and another sizeable chunk (28%) depending on what they had published (one commenter noted that "some topics including feminism, vaccines, gender issues, abortion automatically trigger abusive messages"). Stuff's social media accounts and telephone or in-person encounters were also regular sources of abuse. An overall review of all completed surveys showed that those who had never received common forms of online abuse had, however, all been threatened with, or subjected to, physical violence offline, including in one more extreme example shared by a Pākehā male visual journalist, being shot at while reporting on gang activity.

In total, 50 respondents (39%) had received abusive online messages specifically related to their gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religion and about a quarter (34 journalists) had received abusive messages which they perceived related to their physical appearance (see Table 1). Similarly, about 40% (52 respondents) had been the victim of rumours, deep fakes or attempts to discredit. Comments showed these instances to be a combination of targeted campaigns from specific disgruntled people such as a local government official, personal attacks on a journalist's credentials (e.g., "a few persistent complainants who've done a deep dive into my work and education history to try to prove I'm not qualified to report on certain topics") and more generic anti-media rhetoric.

## Gender Differences

Analysing this data by gender indicates some important differences in the extent and nature of abuse reported by male and female journalists at Stuff. Abusive messages

**Table 1.** Abuse and discrediting of journalists, by gender and ethnicity.

|   | Women<br>(N = 73)              | Māori women<br>(N = 9)        | Men<br>(N = 55)               |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Abusive messages related to gender, ethnicity, etc. | 39 (53%) Yes<br>8 (11%) Unsure | 3 (33%) Yes<br>2 (22%) Unsure | 11 (20%) Yes<br>1 (2%) Unsure |
| Abusive messages related to physical appearance     | 23 (32%) Yes<br>9 (12%) Unsure | 4 (44%) Yes<br>2 (22%) Unsure | 11 (20%) Yes<br>1 (2%) Unsure |
| Rumours, deep fakes and attempts to discredit       | 33 (45%) Yes                   | 4 (44%) Yes                   | 19 (34%) Yes                  |

related to physical appearance were much more likely to be received by women journalists (32%) in the sample than men (20%). Some of the more overt abuse about physical appearance, all directed at women, included being called “ugly, young, fat, comments about clothing, slut, etc.”, “that I needed to ‘fix my teeth’”, “called an ‘ugly bitch’, ‘white pig’, ‘Pākehā ugly c\*\*\*’, etc.”. Derogatory comments about weight were reported only by women. Although the numbers are small, four out of nine (44%) Māori women in the survey recorded abuse about physical appearance. For example, “a bystander called me fat ... I have also had comments [from men] approving of my physical appearance ... which I guess aren’t abusive but make me feel very uncomfortable when I am trying to interview them”. For the seven male journalists who elaborated on their experiences, abuse around physical appearance tended to be in the vein of “pale, stale male”, with some link to homosexuality: “looking like I used a lot of creams and being a pansy”.

Interestingly, some comments about physical appearance occupied a grey area with respect to women journalists’ perceptions of what comprised abuse: on top of the 32%, an additional 12% of women journalists reported they were “unsure” if their experiences met this threshold, explaining for example about messages “not abusive but sexual/creepy – recently ‘I like your hair’ in email with no other context” or the approving comments about appearance noted in the paragraph above.

Besides physical appearance, there was even more marked difference in the reported experience of male and female journalists with abusive and uncomfortable emails or social media posts related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religion. Only a third of women, but three quarters of men, said they had *not* received any such messages (with women again indicating some level of uncertainty around their answer). Interestingly, 4 (44%) of Māori women said they had not received such messages, with another two unsure or not answering. There were 37 illuminating comments from predominantly Pākehā women speaking to the range and diversity of such abuse, and 10 from men, including some who conveyed awareness of their relative privilege with respect to such behaviour: e.g., “I’m white, male, and not religious – great for me not getting abused. Not so great for others. I certainly know female reporters get more abuse for similar stories, and more so if they are not white”.

The qualitative comments in this section suggest this form of identity abuse is primarily linked to gender, rather than ethnicity, sexuality or religion, but it is worth noting that the opportunity to elaborate was almost exclusively taken up by Pākehā women, one of whom described her email inbox as “a festering heap of toxicity” and another who said that “comments about being female are pretty much the common thread of all toxic messages I’ve received”. Two examples were given by women whose racial and sexual identities compounded gender vitriol in ways consistent with UNESCO (2022) and Posetti and Shabbir (2022): “Me and my people are dole-bludging child killers. You N\*\*\*s need to stop moaning and start working”; “I’ve received many homophobic emails and comments in response to opinion pieces written about my sexuality (lesbian), gay rights and issues”. Pākehā women journalists wrote of regularly and typically receiving “comments attacking me for my views as a woman specifically”, “uncomfortable texts relating to my gender ... inappropriate and from a source”, “abusive emails ... they often denigrate me as a woman and use gender as an insult”. Another respondent wrote that it is “always men directing comments at me, a woman ... always a man being derogatory or questioning my authenticity, experience, position”. Female journalists reporting

in the areas of sports, rural issues, entertainment, and science and technology relayed specific examples of being told they should not be covering these topics or writing opinion pieces. E.g., “I used to quite like writing the odd op-ed, just on funny topics or entertainment news, now I turn that kind of thing down because I just cannot believe the feedback that women get if you express ANY opinion”. Others shared instances of unsettling behaviour akin to stalking, for example:

I’ve had a guy seek me out both on my personal Facebook and my work phone to send me sexist messages. He also raised personal things about me (pertaining to my relationship status, which is not something I talk about publicly). It was creepy, gross and unsettling.

### **Ethnicity**

There was less commentary about abusive comments connected to respondents’ ethnicity although in an extract which hints at the relationship between visibility and online abuse, one Māori woman explained how her behind-the-scenes role protected her from the racist feedback that she saw younger colleagues endure: “Because I’m not on the journalism frontline, it’s rare for me to strike cases of abuse, and never have they been aimed at me personally, probably because people don’t realise they’re dealing with a Māori woman”. Qualitative comments did however clearly capture that simply *writing* stories with an ethnicity dimension can lead to racialised abuse, regardless of reporter identity. For instance, a self-described “white passing Māori” respondent explained that she received racist abuse “whenever I have written about Māori and Pasifika ... Most recently I wrote about the dawn raids apology [a government apology for treatment of undocumented Pacific people in the 1970s] and received more than 200 racist responses calling me things like ‘white apologist bitch’”. Several Pākehā women also recounted how reporting Māori news and using Māori language prompted abuse: “whenever I write about Māori I get a string of emails complaining about the story”; “have been called racist (by white people) for using the word Pākehā in my reporting”; “I use a lot of Māori language in my reporting, and I frequently get negative and often racist comments based on this”; “also being told I am a ‘traitor’ to my race for writing about racism to Māori”. Although these examples were only shared by Pākehā women—perhaps suggesting that Pākehā women who write about ethnicity or racism may be particularly targeted in this way—as noted earlier it was the experience of some male journalists that their being *White*, old and male also made them targets for abuse. Thus, our analysis points to a complex intersection of ethnicity, journalist identity and story topic which may be unique to this point of time in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, care is required when interpreting this data given the broader pattern of Māori respondents providing fewer elaborating comments, including on this question of gendered, racialised abuse, whereas Pākehā women commented a lot. Possible reasons for this are discussed further in our limitations.

### **Age**

Although the survey did not specifically ask about this aspect of intersectional experience, age emerged in a handful of comments as a topic of abuse, with a pattern of “old” for Pākehā men (as in “pale, stale, male”) and “youth” or perceived immaturity for women

and Māori: e.g., “I’ve had a fair few saying based on my age or gender [female], I don’t know what I’m talking about”; “I’ve been targeted by older men due to my gender, age, and my looks”; “I’ve been called a millennial Aucklander, meant as an insult” (Māori woman).

## Violence and Threats of Violence

Another strand of the survey was concerned with Stuff journalists’ experiences of work-related violence (see Table 2). Nearly half of all respondents (56 or 44%) had been threatened with violence online, with a third reporting in-person threats (which we defined as face-to-face or on the telephone). In addition, actual offline violence was reported by 18 journalists (14%). Threats of violence included variations on “I’ll kill you” or “I know where you live”. While there were no examples of any journalist being attacked in their own home or office, there were several examples of threatened violence of this nature (e.g., a social media query about whether the journalist’s house had fire insurance, a feather with a note saying “dead man walking” sent to a home address). Threats of and actual sexual violence, reported only by women journalists, are documented further below.

A notable number of respondents experiencing physical violence were visual journalists (7 or 39%), who identified specific challenges inherent in their work: “the camera ... limits your spatial awareness”; “you are in full view most of the time and laden with heavy, expensive gear”. The main theme or commonality around this violence was its location, primarily in situations where journalists were physically showing up to report, often on emotionally charged events: accidents, protests, law courts and at concerts. There were also two instances where the police were identified as instigators of violence.

## Gender and Ethnicity Differences

Overall, male journalists reported higher rates of threats and violence offline although the gender breakdown is identical for online threats of violence, experienced by 44% of all male and female respondents. The online environment presents more risk for women overall, whereas men are equally likely to report in-person and online threats of violence. Although the numbers are small, it is concerning that Māori women reported by far the highest rate of in-person threats of, and actual violence.

Eighteen respondents (nine women, including two Māori, and nine Pākehā men) reported experiencing actual violence on the job, meaning men and Māori women were over-represented here. Examples included “physical altercations” or “shoves from behind” at protests, and having equipment knocked out of their hands. Perhaps understandably given such events happen quickly and can be unexpected and traumatic, elaborating commentary about this violence was not always provided or especially

**Table 2.** Violence and threats towards journalists, by gender and ethnicity.

|                                 | Women<br>(N = 73) | Māori women<br>(N = 9) | Men<br>(N = 55) |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Threats of violence (online)    | 32 (44%)          | 3 (33%)                | 24 (44%)        |
| Threats of violence (in person) | 17 (23%)          | 5 (56%)                | 24 (44%)        |
| Actual physical violence        | 9 (12%)           | 2 (22%)                | 9 (16%)         |

descriptive (one respondent simply reported, “a few physical altercations”). A Māori woman whose work had regularly taken her into crowds said “I’ve had people grab my breasts lots of times ...” and a man who had earlier tried to sexually assault her at an event later urinated on her leg. There were several comments from male respondents who believed their personal appearance, (White) maleness, and physical capabilities protected them to some extent, often accompanied by empathy for female and/or non-White colleagues. For example,

I’ve got a couple of decades dealing with idiots ... in this job and I’m a physically robust Pākehā male. However, I’m very aware of how confronting that kind of scenario might be for a younger reporter, perhaps from a minority group ... especially if it happens in person out in the field.

For one Pākehā female who had experienced actual on-the-job violence: “I am extremely worried I or one of my colleagues will eventually be singled out by an extremist to be attacked or killed.”

Finally, explicit rape threats had been made against several respondents, all Pākehā women: “I hope you get raped”; “someone suggested I should get raped by a flag pole”; “mostly sexual/rape comments ... from readers wanting to ‘clear the cobwebs’ from my vagina, that sort of thing”.

### Responses to Abuse, Violence and Threats

Journalists dealing with abuse and threats have a range of official and unofficial responses available to them. The first important finding from this part of the survey is that more than three quarters of all respondents, both male and female, accept abuse as part of the job. This view was strongest among the Māori women respondents: 89% chose this option compared to 78% of women overall, suggesting that for whatever reason, indigenous women are exemplars of this dominant workplace culture. It is possible that Māori women journalists in a mainstream news organisation have developed a high threshold of tolerance as a means of survival—or that they did not wish to further reflect on their experiences in this survey.

The widespread belief that abuse is part of the job seemed to be enforced for respondents through their experiences with police and employers. According to one Pākehā female respondent, “the agency that could do something about this (police) doesn’t seem to care ... the approach is that the threshold is higher because we are journalists, and some of this comes with the job.” Another Pākehā woman referred to the dominant professional and workplace culture reinforcing the “really dangerous and horribly outdated idea that journalists ‘need a thick skin’ when, really, nobody should be subjected to personal attacks while doing their job.” Another explained the impact of this:

Unfair and cruel abuse from readers ... causes me immense anxiety. Unfortunately, there is a general perception that good journalists are not bothered ... and just take it in their stride ... I feel like I can’t tell my colleagues or superiors ... because the response is always to “just ignore it”.

As [Table 3](#) shows, when they do actively respond to abuse, Staff journalists mostly block comments (40%) and report to a superior (40%). A quarter of respondents also indicate no longer reading comments and/or talking to a friend—the latter behaviour more common

**Table 3.** Journalists' coping mechanisms, by gender and ethnicity.

| Coping mechanism<br>(can select multiples)   | Total<br>% respondents<br>using this<br>mechanism | Women<br>% respondents<br>using this<br>mechanism | Māori women<br>% respondents<br>using this<br>mechanism | Men<br>% respondents<br>using this<br>mechanism |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Consider it just part of the job   | 78  | 78  | 89  | 79  |
| Block them   | 40  | 43  | 33  | 36  |
| Report to a superior   | 40  | 43  | 56  | 36  |
| Don't read comments/social<br>media anymore  | 27  | 29  | 0   | 23  |
| Talk to a friend   | 26  | 36  | 33  | 11  |
| Consider leaving journalism  | 14  | 22  | 33  | 4   |
| Report to police   | 7   | 6   | 11  | 9   |
| Report to the organisation's<br>health and safety system                                   | 6   | 7   | 0   | 4   |
| Use company's counselling<br>service   | 5   | 8   | 11  | 0   |
| Other (e.g., report to internet<br>safety groups, respond to<br>writer, security measures) | 29  | 28  | 22  | 30  |

among female respondents. While 14% of all respondents reported thoughts of leaving the industry, this response is much more prevalent among women, where more than one in five (22%) report this option, compared to 4% men. A third of the nine Māori women respondents (33%) consider leaving the profession.

The data further indicate that three quarters of Stuff staff (74%) are aware of their organisational policy on bullying and harassment, although there is scepticism about its value and the extent of genuine commitment to protecting staff in the face of competing industry pressures. E.g.

I have been bullied and harassed loads and don't know about it [the policy]. I feel like Stuff care more about their reputation and far less about the wellbeing of their journalists (Pākehā woman).

Another Pākehā woman noted the tensions between career advancement and personal safety, writing that "one of the benchmarks ... to make senior reporter is to have a social media presence – a 'brand'. I don't do this as I don't feel safe". She pointed to her employer's requirement to include a photo byline with an email address, saying. "I (quietly) never do this, but sometimes a news director will add it ... The last time this happened on a Covid story, I was inundated with abusive emails ... the use of this widget directly contravenes Stuff's own policy."

More staff (92%) were aware of counselling available through the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). However, few reported using EAP services, possibly because of the professional culture which downplays the impact of abuse, noted above, and/or because of the perception that EAP counsellors lack sufficient understanding of the industry to be helpful: "Yes, it's good this exists, but how many counsellors know anything about journalism?" A Māori woman suggested a general reluctance to use EAP because of the perception its true intent is to gather information about "troubled employees".

To explore whether experiences or observations of abuse and violence have a chilling effect on Stuff journalists, our survey also asked respondents about the impact on their work or general online behaviours. Seventy-one percent agreed they had self-censored on social media because of concerns about online abuse or attacks although far fewer

(24%) had knowingly altered a story. A wide range of comments were received here, almost exclusively from Pākehā respondents, from “absolutely not” and “what ... the reader needs to know ... guides my writing, not whether I’ll get abused online” to admissions that “there are stories I’d be less likely to pursue because I know they would be controversial or divisive and open me up to online criticism or attacks”. No Māori women indicated changing a story or angle.

Some comments indicated that alterations were not solely driven by self-preservation but also concern for potentially vulnerable subjects and sources. Those who agreed that they had altered their journalism because of ongoing abuse identified changes in behaviour such as avoiding getting too close with a camera or turning down opportunities to write opinion pieces on volatile topics. Two Pākehā women journalists explained they were prepared to engage with hostile online commentary from their audience about ethnicity and gender provided it was not particularly aggressive or threatening, and relayed that doing so occasionally had positive outcomes:

Where people email ... or message me ... making racist comments ... say[ing] I’m stupid, or not doing my job properly, or brought off by the government ... I email them back to explain why their message is inappropriate ... once I engage with someone (generally) they are apologetic and start interacting like a normal human being.

Some [initially sexist] email exchanges have morphed into positive experiences for both parties. I’ve even received apologies when they realise there is someone at the other end!

However, this willingness to engage online did not extend to support for initiatives to physically open up a particular Stuff newsroom to visitors, at least for one young Pākehā woman who said she “and other colleagues [are] very concerned about our safety in the new office, particularly the suggestion around allowing people into the newsroom for events on a daily basis”.

## Discussion

The amount of online abuse experienced by Stuff journalists in Aotearoa New Zealand sits within parameters documented in international studies, which range from 40% to “nearly all” journalists experiencing some level of harassment and abuse (e.g., Clark and Grech 2017; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020), with women especially affected (Gardiner 2018; Miller 2022). More than half of all female Stuff journalists have experienced abusive messages related to aspects of their identity, primarily their gender, and nearly half have been subjected to rumours or attempts to discredit, though the former figure likely under-reports the problem given the percentage of women journalists who were unwilling or unable to label their experiences as “abuse”. This finding likely reflects the absence of hard and fast definitions, in both our survey and the literature more broadly, and will also be shaped by the widespread view among our respondents that some level of abuse is part of the job—a belief particularly strongly held among Māori women. But women journalists’ uncertainty is likely also because the widely used definitions of harassment in the journalism literature have not yet rigorously engaged with the presence of gendered or sexual behaviours that are not necessarily aggressive or intended to harm, but nonetheless are based on gender/sex, negatively affect the targeted individual and create an uncomfortable work environment (Miller 2021). Further, if

such comments (deliberately or inadvertently) deflect or distract women journalists, they contribute to broader attempts by sources or audiences to undermine the journalistic function. This pattern is worthy of further investigation.

Although our one-off survey is unable to determine whether antisocial behaviours directed at journalists have increased following the global pandemic, as suggested by UNESCO (2022) and Dobbie (2022), many Stuff journalists did refer in their comments to stories about Covid-19 and vaccines triggering abuse. As in other studies (e.g., Gardiner 2018), stories about gender, sports and entertainment also prompted abuse and/or threats, particularly for women journalists. The role of personal visibility in online harassment (e.g., Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Nilsson and Örnebring 2016) was hinted at by participants who either felt protected by their backstage roles in news production or concerned about the adoption of photo and email bylines. On a more positive note, Stuff journalists were highly aware of organisational policy and procedures around bullying and harassment—as opposed to, for example, just 16% awareness among Australian women journalists in 2016 (quoted in GEV 2019).

The value of our intersectional framework is demonstrated when drilling down into the findings for threats of, and actual violence experienced by Stuff journalists. At the gender level, our results mostly align with Swiss research showing women journalists experience more abuse but are not more likely than men to be physically threatened (Stahel and Schoen 2020): overall, men in our survey experienced the highest rates of offline threats (44%) and actual violence (16%). But the subset of Māori women in our survey had higher rates again (56% and 22%), extending the conclusions of Bundale (2021) and Posetti and Shabbir (2022) about race and ethnicity compounding the extent and severity of online gendered abuse and harassment into the offline world. Similarly, while women Stuff journalists consider leaving the profession at notably higher rates than men, a concern given Aotearoa New Zealand has a gender-balanced journalistic workforce but also a well-documented high turnover of female journalists and traditionally few women in senior and managerial roles (Fontaine et al. 2021), our intersectional analysis indicates that Māori women, at least those working for mainstream media, are particularly drawn to this option. Not all our findings, however, support the notion that ethnicity and gender intersect in ways that simplistically privilege White women—while Māori women experienced higher rates of online abuse around physical appearance they also reported slightly less online abuse related to their gender, ethnicity, sexuality or religion than Pākehā women. Of course, indigenous women may have learned not to complain about racism in the newsroom, in the same way that journalist Jehan Casinader (2021a), Aotearoa New Zealand-born of Sri Lankan parents, explains the steps he took to succeed in journalism: play by the rules to blend in, downplay ethnicity and do not speak about experiences of racism and unconscious bias. It is possible that Māori women have been similarly socialised, although their higher rates of reporting abuse to superiors and police (see Table 3) do not fully support this conclusion.

It is difficult to ignore Pākehā women's extensive and detailed reports of gendered abuse, including when they report on topics about Māori or use indigenous language, an underexamined relationship in the journalist harassment literature. The centrality of gender as a focus of abuse is highly consistent with the broader contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand environment where backlash against women politicians including then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern provides clear evidence that being female can still be a

defining and unpopular gender identity (Duff 2022; Wilson 2023)—and that even the privileges of being White, middle-class and fully-abled offer no real protection. According to moderators at Aotearoa New Zealand’s public radio broadcaster, “even more than stories addressing race, news about the gender pay gap is what draws the most negative feedback to RNZ’s page” (Graham-McLay 2017). Thus, we support Miller’s call for further research into the cultural aspects of journalist harassment and advocate for intersectional research informed by the specifics of cultural context.

While we are cognisant of the limitations of our sample with respect to robust conclusions about the connections between ethnicity and online abuse for Aotearoa New Zealand journalists, it is interesting to note that the widespread weaponisation of ethnic and racial identity has also been observed by industry insiders, including those whose minority racial identity has made them targets. Sri Lankan New Zealander Jehan Casinader (2021b) documents some of the abuse he has received as a journalist while also lamenting that “it’s becoming acceptable – and even fashionable – to condemn all middle-aged white men, purely on the basis of their demographics”. This “race to the bottom” strikes at the heart of the news media’s democratic function and audience trust. Further, given that “online harassment can be leveraged to strategically silence journalists and push them away from covering certain ideas and groups” (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020, 1063; see also Nilsson and Örnebring 2016), media attention to women, gender and ethnicity or racism issues is at particular risk in an Aotearoa New Zealand environment characterised by the extent of abuse and violence captured in our survey. In a radio interview following her decision to step away from journalism, Stuff reporter Michelle Duff mentioned her and other women’s experiences of online abuse, stating that “it’s designed to silence” (Peacock 2023). Indeed, what Waisbord (2020) terms mob censorship—“citizen vigilantism aimed at disciplining journalism” (1030)—presents one of the greatest societal challenges to contemporary liberal democracies, including in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Conclusion

No journalist in our study of Aotearoa New Zealand’s largest news provider, Stuff, was untouched by abuse or violence, although the extent and nature of this differed by gender and ethnicity and in some surprising ways. The overall patterns and journalists’ descriptions of abuse and harassment are highly similar to those documented in other studies from liberal democracies, with the online environment a clearly unfriendly space for women journalists, with respect to both abuse and threats of violence. Male journalists overall experienced higher rates of threatening and violent behaviour offline but not to the same extent as Māori women, who reported the very highest rates of in-person threats and violence.

While this article has presented a much-needed gendered and intersectional analysis of survey data about the online and offline violence and abuse directed at journalists in Aotearoa New Zealand, anti-social behaviours emerge as a common professional experience for all respondents. Beyond documenting safety risks to individuals in certain organisations and among particular groups, this article sounds a broader warning about the future of the journalistic profession and the many democracies it serves around the world. When no journalist is immune from abuse and harassment, swift action is required to protect the watchdog. A nuanced understanding of how

identity and context shapes experience must be an important precursor to a meaningful, tailored industry and societal response.

## Limitations and Future Research

This survey is limited to newswriters at one mainstream news organisation, albeit Aotearoa New Zealand's largest provider, Stuff. It is possible although not highly likely that their experiences with online abuse and physical violence vary in some systematic way from their journalistic peers at other Aotearoa New Zealand media outlets; however, international evidence would suggest that if anything, online and newspaper journalists receive less abuse than broadcast journalists. It is also important to note that while this survey provided anonymity, the fact that it was actively supported and promoted by Stuff management does mean respondents may have shaped their answers with this in mind (being careful of what they said for fear of repercussions with respect to their employment or deliberately playing up the risks in an effort to lobby for further action). Some individual staff—particularly those from ethnic minorities—may have limited their comments due to concern these would make them identifiable; it was certainly the case that most commentary on our questions was provided by respondents who identified as Pākehā. We have also been cautious of including comments from very small subsets of respondents, such as Māori men, where these risk betraying anonymity.

In undertaking qualitative analysis of written online survey responses, we acknowledge our selections will be shaped by our own experiences and identities, though this is at least partly offset by our professional research training and the accompanying reporting of quantitative survey data. Our research context and design (Pākehā women researchers studying a mainstream news organisation in a small country) thus contributes to limitations which future research would usefully seek to offset. For instance, a higher trust model might exist with indigenous researchers undertaking face-to-face interviews with Māori journalists about their experiences of abuse and violence across a range of mainstream and Māori media. It would also be useful to use an intersectional lens to explore the experiences of other non-White journalists in Aotearoa New Zealand newsrooms.

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