“Who’s Going to be a Creep Today?”
Understanding the Social Media Experiences of Women Broadcast Journalists

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Abstract
Reports of the online harassment of journalists have continued to increase as more newsrooms place higher emphasis on social media engagement with audiences. However, this harassment is subject to gendered dynamics, as women journalists are most often the target of online abuse, and the attacks themselves are often gender-centric. This study employs a mixed-method approach to explore how gender influences broadcast journalists’ social media interactions with audiences. Qualitative interviews with US broadcast journalists, along with a social media discourse analysis of the journalists’ Twitter pages, reveal the sexist nature of these interactions. Specifically, findings show that women journalists are treated not only as sexual objects, but also as non-serious journalists. In response to this treatment, women journalists adjust their social media strategies by limiting what they post and blocking certain users. This puts women journalists in a difficult position: increase coveted audience engagement and deal with online harassment or block abusive social media users and suffer the career impacts of low audience engagement. Implications are discussed.

Keywords
gender, journalism, news, social media

The International Center for Journalists calls online harassment “the new front line for women journalists.” This was in response to a survey that found 73% of women journalists were victims of online abuse; 20% of those said they were targeted with offline attacks connected to this online abuse (International Center for Journalists, 2020). However, as online harassment against women journalists becomes more pervasive, so does the importance of audience engagement for journalists.

Social media news consumption is continuing to climb. Seventy-one percent of US adults surveyed said they have gotten news from social media, with Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter being the top three platforms (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). As two-way news platforms continue to outperform legacy media, audience interaction has become a key metric for the success of broadcast journalists (McElroy, 2019). However, as this study suggests, most of these interactions are subjected to the same gendered prejudices that have been instilled in the broadcast news industry for decades. This creates a difficult situation for women journalists who, to succeed in their careers, must engage with audiences online, even if that means they are constantly subjected to online harassment.

This study explores this important and timely issue through a mixed-method approach of qualitative interviews with top broadcast journalists in the United States and a social media discourse of the journalists’ Twitter pages. A top broadcast journalist for this study is defined as one working in a top 12 designated market area (DMAs), as these journalists are typically regarded as trendsetters and role models, thus providing a gauge of overall trends in the news industry. A detailed discussion of DMAs follows in the “Method” section.

The mixed-method approach helps to uncover how gender impacts journalists’ interactions with audience members and how women journalists, specifically, negotiate through

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those interactions. These negotiations include adjusting their own social media performances and limiting/controlling public access to their social media profiles. Findings shed light on the gendered, and sometimes dangerous, ways in which these interactions take place.

**Significance of Study**

This study is important because it speaks to the heart of the ongoing problematic treatment of women in the news industry, especially within the context of broadcast news. Research dating back to the 1970s shows the prevalence of sexism and gender discrimination in the news industry (Sanders & Pritchett, 1971), and unfortunately, those trends are still in existence today (Blumell, 2020). This decades-long problem has benefited from feminist research, but more still needs to be done.

Recent news stories have shed light on the dangerous consequences of the normalization of the online abuse against women journalists. In 2017, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that in 40% of cases, journalists who were murdered had received threats online before they were killed. Individual stories, such as the 2017 murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, highlight how gendered attacks online can be precursors to offline violence and even murder.

The goal of this study is to add to the important empirical documentation of the abuse women journalists face online in hopes of continuing to raise public awareness of this issue and aid in the process of de-normalizing such attacks.

**Literature Review**

**Sexism in the News Industry**

Foundational studies on sexism in the broadcast news industry date back to the 1970s. Sanders and Pritchett (1971) mailed out surveys to audience members to gauge their perceptions of local broadcast journalists. Findings indicated that audiences significantly preferred clean-cut White men to deliver the news. Not surprisingly, the stations with the highest ratings employed all-men news teams comprising clean-cut, well-dressed, and Caucasian broadcast journalists. While women broadcasters have made strides since these foundational studies (Jurkowitz, 2014), more recent research highlights the gendered inequalities still facing women broadcasters today.

Men continue to dominate the news industry in the United States (Women’s Media Center, 2017). A 2017 study by the Women’s Media Center showed that the majority of news reports across all mediums were produced by men, with the broadcast industry having the highest gender disparity. In addition, the study showed that men journalists are typically assigned “hard” topics like politics and crime, while women journalists usually report on feature topics like lifestyle and health. Howell and Singer (2017) suggested that there is still a gendered etiquette in the broadcast news industry. The researchers conducted a survey of broadcast journalists and found that women broadcasters were less confident in their abilities to appear as experts on their beats because they did not want to appear self-promoting or pushy. These women acknowledged a social etiquette that was expected of them that differed from their men counterparts; men broadcasters were allowed to be aggressive and egotistical, but women broadcasters were supposed to be humble and polite. Consequently, this study found that men were four times as likely as women to appear as an “expert” on the local news (Howell & Singer, 2017).

The salaries of broadcast journalists are also subject to gender discrimination. According to a 2017 report by Glassdoor, the media industry holds the number five position for the highest pay gap between genders in US labor industries (Chamberlain, 2017).

Audience opinion helps to shape the newsroom and on-air culture of broadcast television news stations. In the United States, most local broadcast news stations face economic pressures as they are for-profit businesses. As local news audiences continue to shrink, news managers seek to accommodate viewers’ wants and needs in any way possible (Tandoc & Thomas, 2014). Unfortunately, gender inequalities tend to play into these strategic plans. Through a survey of broadcast journalists, North (2016b) found that gender roles influence story assignments, specifically women journalists are assigned “soft” news topics like fashion, health, and family and men journalists are assigned “hard” news topics like politics and crime. Though more women are working as journalists and as newsroom managers than ever before, North argued that “women remain steadfastly pigeon-holed in soft news areas that are deemed less prestigious than hard news genres” (North, 2016b, p. 369). Findings suggested that women do not choose soft news topics, but they are assigned them based on gendered politics in the newsroom and audience expectations of news coverage. These decisions have impacts on the advancement of women journalists and their credibility in the news industry (North, 2016b).

Broadcast news organizations in countries outside of the United States are funded in different ways, but women journalists still face the same gendered challenges. Women journalists face harassment in the newsroom and online, with this problem transcending geography and culture and impacting women around the world (Chen et al., 2020). Reports of online harassment of women journalists have been the focus of research in countries across the globe, including Bangladesh (Kundu & Bhuiyan, 2021), Pakistan (Jamil, 2020), and Sweden (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), among others. The current study focuses on a US population, but future research would benefit from exploring the global threads connecting women journalists’ experiences with online harassment.
Finneman and Jenkins (2018) conducted a survey of broadcast journalists and found that social media reinforce the unrealistic beauty expectations placed on women broadcasters. The authors argued that social media allow audiences “to publicly correct gender performance and maintain the status quo” through Twitter interaction and comments (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018, p. 490). Twitter allows audiences to publicly judge women broadcasters’ appearance and even offer unwanted sexual advances. Findings showed that many women journalists take these comments to heart and use them to influence their own personal appearance. The survey also indicated that women broadcasters felt they did not receive the proper support from their news organizations in handling potentially damaging remarks.

**Online Harassment of Journalists**

Since its onset, social media platforms have facilitated online harassment, abuse, and hate speech (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Certain characteristics unique to social media allow users to harmfully target individuals with little to no consequence. Using Goffman’s Impression Management Theory as a guide, Kilvington (2021) argued that social media’s anonymity, invisibility, dissociative imagination, and rapid response serve as factors that encourage online hate speech and harassment. That is, users, under the veil of anonymity, are able to engage in a space where social norms do not apply, thus providing a platform where inappropriate and abusive communication exists (Kilvington, 2021). This atmosphere is also present in online gaming. Tang and Fox (2016) found that players who exhibited social dominance orientation, highly influenced by anonymity, predicted higher levels of sexual harassment in video game play. Anonymous users acted in more gender-stereotypical ways than non-anonymous users (Tang & Fox, 2016). Koirala (2020) analyzed the online abuse of women journalists and found that 62% of harassers could not be identified. The majority of the harassment was from anonymous users (Koirala, 2020).

Much of the harassment, both in-person and online, that women journalists face is sexual in nature (North, 2016a). Stahel and Schoen confirmed this through a survey of both men and women journalists. They found that women were more likely to be sexually harassed than men, and these sexual attacks were more stressful for women than men, contributing to more women quitting the news industry all together (Stahel & Schoen, 2020). Lucy Westcott, a researcher with the Committee to Protect Journalists, conducted a multi-country survey of women journalists and found that online harassment was cited as the biggest threat by 90% of US participants, with many telling stories of sexual harassment and even threats of rape and sexual violence (Westcott, 2019). Safa and Akter (2015) found that while sexual harassment was a major problem among women journalists, most women did not report it in, feeling their claims would be ignored or even mocked.

Online harassment impacts how women journalists approach their jobs. Some women’s experiences with online harassment are so bad that it disrupts their daily routines and practices as journalists (Relly, 2021). Carlson and Witt (2020) found that women journalists were less likely to want to cover polarizing topics, like politics, because they anticipated being trolled by audience members online. In this sense, women journalists’ important roles as government watchdogs were deemphasized and, in some cases, erased altogether (Carlson & Witt, 2020). Technology is another topic women journalists are shying away from because of anticipated audience pushback. Adams (2018) found that most online harassment women journalists faced was sexist in nature, with abusers “going for gender first” (p. 858). This abuse forced many women technology journalists to take time off for mental health reasons or even quit their jobs (Adams, 2018). Everbach (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with women sports journalists and found that harassment actually drove young women away from the profession, keeping the field men-dominated, as it has been for decades. Pain and Chen (2019) interviewed women journalists and found that online abuse negatively impacted the mental and emotional health of many women in the news industry, yet very little support was offered to them.

In her book, *Credible Threat*, Sobieraj (2020) exposes the pervasiveness of extreme online abuse against women. She offers potential solutions and sites of resistance to battle back against this gendered form of harassment. Sobieraj (2020) advocates for a victim-centered approach that gives women victims instructions on how to document and report online attacks and offers the services of specific support structures like social workers and advocacy groups. One such advocacy group, TrollBusters, was specifically created to support women journalists. The group was created to combat the abuse through positive messaging, defense strategies, and online rescue services for women journalists (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018). In addition, the hashtag #MoreThanMean was launched to raise awareness to online hate received by women sports journalists. This allowed for women journalists all over the world to join in on the conversation and share their own experiences with digital harassment as a sign of solidarity and support (Antunovic, 2019).

While supportive measures like TrollBusters and hashtags advocate for women journalists, communications researchers and practitioners are calling for more support from newsroom management. Feminist scholar Fiona Martin argued for more direct action from employers and legal and political institutions to combat the gender-specific digital harassment of women journalists (Martin, 2018). In a piece for *Colombia Journalism Review*, communications scholar and journalist Anne Petersen also acknowledged the need for more involvement and support from newsroom management, noting how women journalists quickly realize “supervisors may or may not have the same level of concern, or firsthand exposure, to the threats [women journalists] face” (Petersen, 2018).
While the aforementioned literature is valuable, there is a gap in the literature connecting experiences to action. This study aims to fill that gap in two ways. First, by employing a mixed-method approach, this study addressed the issue of women journalists’ harassment online in a more complete way. Analyzing how women journalists’ lived experiences relate to concrete actions online serves to provide a broader understanding of the cycle of abuse of women journalists’ both in the newsroom and on social media. In addition, much of the current literature does not address the actions being taken by women journalists or the actions women journalists want newsroom management to take to combat online harassment. This study aims to better understand what actions can be taken to prevent the online abuse of women journalists and how these actions can be implemented in newsroom culture.

Based on the previous literature, this study addresses two main research questions:

\textbf{RQ1}. How are women journalists treated when they engage with audiences online?

\textbf{RQ2}. How do women journalists respond to or cope with sexist audience interactions online?

\section*{Method}

A mixed-method approach was used to address this study’s main research questions. Both qualitative interviews and a discourse analysis of Twitter were conducted in an effort to answer the research questions. According to Muck Rack’s annual State of Journalism report, Twitter is the social media used most by journalists and so was the social media platform analyzed for this study (Muck Rack, 2019). Qualitative interviews were conducted to understand how broadcasters of each gender perceived audience interaction. A discourse analysis was then conducted to explore how gender impacted these interactions on Twitter in a more tangible way.

\subsection*{Sampling and Recruitment}

The first author’s contacts were utilized to recruit US broadcast journalists as interview participants. To be included in the sample for this study, participants had to be working in one of the top 12 DMAs and be active on social media. Broadcasters who work in top DMAs are regarded as role models in the industry, thus strongly influencing journalists in lower markets. The exclusivity of the participant sample also adds to the uniqueness of the study. A detailed discussion of DMA structure follows.

According to Nielsen (2013), a DMA is “a group of counties that form an exclusive geographic area in which the home market television stations hold a dominance of total hours viewed.” DMAs are ranked by total population of the geographic area, and so their rankings tend to change slightly on a yearly basis. According to Nielsen, the top 12 DMAs for the 2018–2019 television season are New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Dallas/Fort Worth, Washington, DC, Houston, San Francisco, Boston, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Tampa. Both men and women broadcast journalists were included in the sample, in generally even amounts.

\subsection*{Interview Protocol and Procedure}

Oral consent was obtained before the start of each interview. Each interview was conducted via telephone and audio recorded, and permission to record the interview was obtained from all participants prior to beginning the interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min. The interview schedule consisted of a set of questions, but the semi-structured nature of interviews allowed room for flexibility and follow-ups.

After the interviews were completed, the audio files were transcribed. The audio files were subsequently destroyed. The transcriptions were stored and will be kept secure in a Box account with controlled access for the time required by the institutional review board that approved the protocol.

\subsection*{Participants}

Eleven women and nine men were interviewed for this study. All participants currently work in a top 12 DMA as a broadcast journalist and are active on social media. The years of experience ranged from 4½ to 30 and all participants had worked in multiple DMAs over the course of their broadcast careers. The names of each participant have been changed and identifying information has been removed.

\subsection*{Discourse Analysis of Social Media}

As part of this mixed-method project, a discourse analysis of social media networks was also conducted. For this study, the Social Feed Manager software was used to collect tweets from all 20 of the broadcasters who participated in the semi-structured interviews; broadcasters were aware we would be using their tweets for research purposes. Audience engagement was measured by analyzing journalists’ “most favored” and “most retweeted” tweets as well as audience commentary. 20 of the best performing tweets in each of the two categories were analyzed, resulting in a discourse analysis of \( N = 800 \) tweets, along with their associated responses and attributes.

All the tweets collected were public, as to abide by Twitter’s privacy policies. A discourse analysis of social media networks was conducted as a way to better situate the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. Some elements of the Tweets, such as names of specific people or places, were retracted to protect the identities of the participants in this study.
Findings
To answer the research questions, findings from both the journalists’ qualitative interviews and discourse analysis of the journalists’ social media accounts were triangulated to develop common themes. RQ1 asked: How are women journalists treated when they engage with audiences online? Two themes emerged relating to this question. These themes are: women journalists are treated as sexual objects and women journalists are treated as non-serious journalists. RQ2 asked: How do women journalists respond to or cope with sexist audience interactions online? Two themes also emerged relating to this question. These themes are: women journalists change their own social media strategies in anticipation of audience abuse and women journalists change how they interact with audience members in response to audience abuse.

Both men and women journalists participated in this study and both offer valuable insight. However, research shows that women are more likely than men to be marginalized online and online harassment disproportionately affects women (Sobieraj, 2020). It is justified, then, to highlight the experiences of women journalists, rather than compare women with men, in an effort to explore and explain this gendered trope in the news industry. Findings are detailed further in the following sections.

Women Journalists as Sexual Objects
RQ1 asked: How are women journalists treated when they engage with audiences online? One common theme across the qualitative interviews and the social media analysis is that women journalists are treated as sexual objects by audience members online. Women journalists are asked out on dates, subjected to cat-calling and sexual comments, criticized for their physical appearance, and objectified by audiences on social media.

According to the qualitative interviews, women said they are routinely judged by how they look instead of their work. Erica said,

Sometimes the comments on a story won’t be like, “Oh, that was a great story, oh, like great interview” or anything like that. It’ll be like “Oh, like you look so pretty today, or oh that’s such a lovely dress or lovely color” and you know, Um, and certainly there’s people who want to bash your image or don’t like what you’re wearing and you’re just, as a woman, you’re constantly just reminded about how you look.

Nicole echoed this point, saying:

I’ll get messages all the time, just people commenting on my appearance, whether it’s good or bad. I know that our appearance is a part of what we do as a broadcaster, but it’s definitely not the most important part of what I do.

Women were also quick to point out that they perceive being sexualized as uniquely a woman’s problem and understand that most of their male colleagues do not deal with such issues. Kara said,

Something tells me that guys don’t get them as often as girls do, just from my conversations. So, I do think women . . . I think women get asked on dates, I think women get you know, get criticized. I think women are much more vulnerable to a whole range of comments when they post something, regardless of how benign their posting is.

Qualitative interview data confirmed Kara’s sentiment, as none of the men participants noted being sexualized by audiences online. In fact, they claimed that most of their interactions were neutral and work appropriate. Greg said,

I don’t really have like too many interactions. Nothing other than like “Hey how are you? Fine. How are you?” “Oh, the weather like it’s going to be cold.” You know it’s not terribly exciting. On Facebook I definitely get a lot more out of it like “Hey can you explain this or why did you say this when I heard this on another station?” “What is this?” And I try to I try to sort out all the facts for people as fast as I can.

To sum up her experience with audience members online, Amy simply stated “I mean my inbox and my messages are flooded with weirdos.”

Data from the discourse analysis of social media echoed the data from the qualitative interviews and exemplified the sexual objectification women broadcasters face online. One of the most successful tweets (as measured by audience engagement) from one of the women journalists was “It’s #UglySweaterDay! [Pet cat’s name] and I are wishing you a Meowy Christmas!” and included a photo of the women broadcaster and her cat. Audience comments on this post included: “Does [pet cat’s name] need a Daddy?” and a comment containing only heart eyes emojis. In this example, a tweet with seemingly no sexual overtones elicited sexualized responses, suggesting that any kind of content posted by women journalists can potentially solicit unwanted sexist commentary.

Another successful tweet from a different woman journalist was “The recent weather definitely calls for pants. Can’t do 50 degrees anymore!” and included a video of the women anchor doing a short, silly dance with pants on. Audience comments included: “Well hello” with a heart eyes emoji, “Is it Merengue or Bachata?” alluding to the broadcaster’s Latina heritage, and “Come swim with me” with a video of a man’s pool in his backyard. Instead of commenting on the subject of the Tweet (the weather), which is universally relatable, most audience members chose to comment on the journalist herself, specifically on her body and her movements. This example was particularly interesting because audience commentary included allusions not only to the journalist’s
sexuality, but also to her ethnicity. The implication that the journalist’s silly dance would be “merengue or bachata” connects to Martynuska’s (2016) notion of the exotic other, specifically how “the popular images of Latina bodies revolve around racialization, sexualisation, exoticization and tropic-alization” (p. 79).

Finally, the most “favorited” tweet from another woman journalist was “BTS [a boy band] fever is taking over the newsroom . . . the #BTSArmy inspired me to wear purple today!” and included a photo of the journalist and a male co-anchor wearing purple. Again, instead of commenting on the content of the actual Tweet (the arrival of a popular boy band in their city), audiences commented on the journalist’s body. Audience comments included: “My lady you look like a goddess,” “You look stunning with that purple dress,” and “I love you.” This Tweet was unique because it contained a photo of a woman journalist and male journalist together, wearing the same color, but only comments on the body of the female journalist were included in audience discussion.

The sexualization of women journalists is nothing new and research on this topic, as noted in the previous sections, dates back decades; however, social media platforms present a new level of this trend. Audiences now have direct access to women journalists through their social media pages, allowing sexual commentary to be more specific, direct, and immediate. Audience members can also remain anonymous on social media, creating a space for more sexual harassment. Research shows that social media users can engage in socially unacceptable behavior under a veil of anonymity, allowing them to act outside the norms of face-to-face communication with no damage done to their personal reputation or social status. Pressure to engage with audience members presents unique challenges for women journalists dealing with sexual harassments online.

**Women as Non-Serious Journalists**

RQ1 asked: How are women journalists treated when they engage with audiences online? In addition to being treated as sexual objects, data from the qualitative interviews and social media analysis suggest that women journalists are viewed as non-serious journalists by social media followers. Women journalists are not taken seriously even when posting about serious subjects like crime and politics. Research shows that women journalists are routinely assigned more soft news stories than their male counterparts (North, 2016b). However, findings of the current study suggest that even when women cover hard news topics, they are still not viewed as serious journalists. Their hard news posts are met with mockery, poked fun at, or simply ignored.

Sarah pointed to the fact that audiences seem to ignore her work and focus on other aspects of her reporting when she covers hard news topics: Unfortunately, I would say at least once a week maybe even more than that, there are comments that have nothing to do with my skill or what I was saying, it was strictly about how I looked or how I talked.

Even so, women journalists still strive to be taken seriously, and many use social media to try to brand themselves as hardworking professionals. Amy said,

I think branding it’s just like, it’s something I think about a lot. So right now, the image that I try to project is professionalism, trustworthiness, and youthfulness.

However, the social media analysis shows that audiences engage more with women journalists when they Tweet about soft news topics like human interest, fashion, or entertainment. Tweets on these topics perform much better with audiences than Tweets about hard news topics like crime or politics.

The most popular tweet from one of the women journalists was “HERO PUPPY: This golden retriever stepped in harm’s way to stop his owner from getting bitten by a rattlesnake during a walk & he was bitten instead. Let’s wish Todd speedy recovery! He’s only 6months old!” The tweet included a photo of the puppy. Audience comments on this tweet included: “Only a dog can look this cute with a swollen face!!! What a good boy! We don’t deserve dogs,” “THE GOODEST BOI,” and “I just want to give him a hug.” This particular journalist, as the case with most participants in this study, tweeted about a variety of topics including hard news topics. However, the tweet about the hero puppy was the most successful with audiences and elicited non-serious commentary. Research shows that soft news stories about pets are popular among audiences, especially on social media (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017). In the current study, both men and women journalists posted about pets, but pet posts were only among the most popular with audiences for women journalists.

Even when women journalists try to engage with audiences about hard news topics, they still receive comments showing they are not taken seriously as journalists. One of the most successful hard news tweets by a women journalist was “Republican gubernatorial candidate visiting with [city] Sikh leaders over tea.” The tweet included a video of the men sitting in a conference room discussing politics over tea, which included traditional Middle Eastern foods. The woman journalist was present at the meeting and filmed the video, but did not appear in it. This tweet, while on a serious news topic, elicited non-serious commentary. The tweet received 20 audience comments, six of which were poking fun at the content. Audience comments included: “Your dad wears a turban,” “Pass the samoseh” (a Middle Eastern dish), and “I’m hungry.” This tweet is a good example of the resistance some women journalists face to their strategic social media plans to brand themselves as professionals in the news industry.

Not being taken seriously seems to be a problem unique to women journalists, as the men in this study did not report this
issue. In fact, quite the opposite, as both data from the qualitative interviews and data from the social media discourse suggest that audiences mostly engage with male journalists about the news at hand, especially hard news. To this point, Josh said:

People interact, interact, with you about “How do you know this?” “How did the police uncover it?” Yada yada, yada. So, interacting with them about the facts of the story or for severe weather or breaking news, uh, they’re wanting to know what’s going on.

The discourse analysis data support this. One of the most successful tweets by a male journalist was “Cocaine, crack, and an AR-15 found in the home of a preschool teacher, who police say was running a big time drug operation” and included mugshots. Audiences used the tweet as an opportunity to ask the journalist questions. Audience questions included: “Was she a good teacher?” “Did she harm students?” and “Are crack and cocaine the same thing?” There was no commentary about the journalist himself or off-handed comments from audiences.

Findings suggest women are pigeonholed as “fluff journalists” who are only successful when covering soft news topics. Audiences engage the most when women journalists tweet about light-hearted stories. Many women journalists, however, strive for more, and want to cover hard news topics; however, when they do, they are met with a non-serious commentary that suggests this stigma is hard to overcome.

**Adjusting Social Media Strategies**

RQ2 asked: How do women journalists respond to or cope with sexist audience interactions online? A common theme across the qualitative interviews and the social media analysis is that women journalists change their own social media strategies in anticipation of audience abuse, specifically by men. Some of these strategies include: purposely not posting certain content, limiting comments, blocking users, reporting users, or even getting the authorities involved.

Women journalists are hyper-aware of the content they post and adjust it based on the demographics of their social media following. Carolyn said,

I notice that it’s like 75 percent men, 25 percent women that follow me. And the men are kind of gross, right? I mean let’s be real. If I am on a vacation that’s like a beach or whatever, I wouldn’t necessarily post me in a bikini because like you know, I do know who my audience is. I don’t want them to think that I am . . . whatever.

Sarah echoed this point saying, “I watch out about certain pictures. It definitely is unfortunate, but it’s always in the back of your mind. It’s like who’s going to be a creep today?”

Tiffany agreed, and she adjusts her social media strategies based on the male-dominated demographics of her social media following. She said,

I don’t want them to look at me like a, I guess like a piece of meat really. I try to stay away from like anything, like if I’m out in the beach, I’m not going to really post like a bathing suit picture or anything like that just because I know what kind of comments I will be getting, you know. I tried to stay away from certain types of posts that will get that kind of attention.

In addition to monitoring and limiting the kind of content they post overall, women journalists also adjust their social media strategies in response to the actions of specific audience members. Many women block or remove certain users who are repeat harassers. Jessica said, “I turned comments and messages off. I sit here and instead of people trying to send me hateful messages or anything terrible, I can cut it off and we won’t even have to go there.”

Many of the women interviewed said there is a clear difference between how they handle interactions with men and with women. Many interactions fall along gender lines, with women broadcasters ignoring or blocking abusive male users, while encouraging interaction with women audience members. Victoria highlights this gendered divide by saying:

I guess I’ve never responded to him because I don’t want to like encourage him. Some people I’ll respond to if it’s a legitimate question or comment, and if women write to me, I always write back to them because I want to encourage them to keep writing.

The women journalists in this study all acknowledged the importance of social media engagement and understood how important social media presence is to their station management. However, many women still chose to ignore, delete, or block certain users even if it hurt their overall social media numbers. In this sense, they are forced to choose between blocking abusive users and losing out on social media analytics or keeping all of their followers and dealing with harassment. Amy said she would rather lose numbers than deal with continued abuse:

I deliberately try not to interact with my audience too much, which is like not what you’re supposed to do. But I feel like if I engage too much with audience members who are mostly men and, you know, older maybe, I’ll just spur an unwelcomed conversation, and so I really try not to engage in that.

Data from the social media analysis clearly show why many women journalists must adjust their social media strategies in anticipation of abuse. Some of the comments these women received on their pages were blatant sexual harassment. The most forward comments included: “Very healthy and beautiful looking ladies. Don’t mean to sound like a dirty old man,” “Never noticed those sexy blue eyes,” and “Too bad you got Lasik. You looked so hot with glasses.” Additional
comments were even more alarming, including: “Those are the Most Kissable Lips I’ve Seen,” “Does [her pet cat] need a Daddy? ‘Cause I’m Game!” and “Let’s go Humping then.”

Comments like these create a space where women journalists feel threatened and unsafe. Sarah was so impacted by online sexual harassment that she feared being stalked and followed in real life. Sarah said,

One piece of advice that someone gave me was to always post where you were and not where you are. That way, you can avoid people trying to come up to you or you just don’t know what people’s intentions are sometimes.

For Kara, Sarah’s fears became reality and she had to rely on legal action. Kara said, “I mean I had to get the cops involved a couple of times. I mean that’s really weird.”

The heightened pressure to perform online coupled with increasing sexist interactions with social media followers, places women journalists, particularly, in a difficult situation. They are forced to face challenges not faced by their male counterparts and make decisions that can impact their career, their mental health, and their safety.

Discussion

Findings of the current study support recent research that highlights the prevalence of sexism in the broadcast industry (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018; Luisi et al., 2021; Miller & Lewis, 2022). However, the current study presents additional findings and offers up strategies to help mitigate the gendered challenges faced by women broadcast journalists. Broadcast journalists, more so than print or web journalists, face criticism from audiences due to their visibility and role in the public eye. Mellado and Hermida (2021) found that social media allow broadcast journalists to play the role of local celebrity and their online following can lead to an increase in social notoriety. The current study uniquely focuses only on broadcast journalists.

Through a mixed-method approach of qualitative interviews with broadcast journalists and an analysis of their Twitter pages, this study found that women are forced to change their social media strategies and the way they interact with audiences in anticipation of harassment. Men broadcasters do not face these same challenges. Findings suggest that women broadcasters routinely deal with cat-calling, comments on their physical appearance, unwanted sexual advances, and mockery. They are viewed as either sexual objects or non-serious journalists.

Social media have amplified sexism in the broadcast news industry. Social media platforms give audiences unprecedented access to broadcasters by facilitating easy, immediate, and direct one-on-one communication (Lee et al., 2017). Social media’s anonymity has shielded online harassers from the social consequences of acting in such ways (Kilvington, 2021). Findings of this study suggest that sometimes this online harassment can translate to the real world, which can lead to dangerous situations for women broadcasters.

There is a lack of research that connects the online harassment of women journalists with the offline consequences. Findings of this study show that women journalists are very aware of this potential and adjust their social media strategies in an attempt to mitigate offline problems. For example, some women will post where they were, not where they are. Some women will purposely not post certain content that would allow someone to locate them or their families. Some women have even had to call the police. Social media gives people the ability to share their lives with the world; however, this can mean unknowingly giving private or personal information to people who will use it for harm. Celebrity stalkers, for example, sometimes use social media posts to find private information, like home addresses, to be able to locate celebrities in real life (CBC Radio, 2016).

Finneman et al. (2019) argued that newsroom management has an organizational responsibility to protect and defend women journalists form online harassers. Findings of the current study serve to inform strategies and policies newsrooms can implement to do just that. First, newsroom managers should be made more aware of the issues women broadcasters are facing on social media. Some women may be weary to bring up these issues in fear of retaliation or in fear of being perceived as weak or problematic (Johnson et al., 2016). To protect their privacy and their jobs, newsroom management should set up an anonymous way for staff to report harassment, both in the newsroom and online. These issues should then be discussed in constructive and collaborative ways. Currently, broadcasters in many top newsrooms are ranked by their social media engagement: the more followers and shares they have, the higher they are ranked. These rankings can impact promotions, pay raises, and story assignments (Davis et al., 2021). News managers need to understand how this can be problematic for women. Findings of the current study show that some women will intentionally not interact on social media, block users, or limit comments. These strategies, while implemented for safety, can have negative consequences on the social media analytics and ranking for women broadcasters. This places women in a difficult situation: interact with online abusers to keep metrics up or limit interactions for safety and risk losing valuable newsroom rankings?

Newsrooms should also have clear policies for broadcasters on how to handle online trolls. Many newsrooms already have codes of conduct and employee handbooks. Social media interaction deserves to be an important part of those policies because findings suggest social media is a key part of broadcaster’s routines. Social media training should also be implemented in newsrooms. Hands-on workshops and seminars can focus on the best ways to use social media safely. Social media platforms are rapidly changing and platforms come into and out of popularity quickly. Continued social media training will prepare broadcast journalists for the potential problems they may face and pose potential solutions. Workshops like these would also be important to introduce in journalism schools so young journalists, especially
women, have the tools they need to deal with gendered harassment online.

Limitations and Future Research

Although considerable thought was invested in the planning and execution of this study, there are limitations that should be noted. While these limitations should be discussed, they do not invalidate the findings of this study. Rather, they should be used to better understand the findings and inform future studies.

There were methodological limitations in the recruitment of the participants. Industry contacts were used to start a snowball sample. Because of this, all of the participants are indirectly linked socially and professionally. Perhaps, their opinions and outlooks are also connected. “Cold calling” through e-mailing random broadcasters in top 12 DMAs was originally used, but the response rate was extremely low. Perhaps having a more random sample would have resulted in different findings.

Phone interviews are subject to some limitations. They do not allow researchers to pay attention to the entire person and their communication style, including: gaps in discussion, omissions, body language, tone, and facial expressions (DeVault & Gross, 2012). Conducting face-to-face interviews may have provided a more complete account of participant interviews.

Future research should explore journalists’ audience engagement on newer social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Social media are unique because they are constantly and rapidly changing. Even within a matter of months, new social media platforms emerge while others lose popularity. Future research should continue to examine the latest media technologies and their impacts on the broadcast news industry as to keep the gap between theory and practice as small as possible.

Future research would also benefit from exploring the impacts of other demographic factors in regard to the online harassment of journalists. Ethnicity emerged as a factor in this study, and while not the focus of this particular research project, future research would benefit from exploring how race and gender intersect to impact the social media experiences of journalists. It would also be interesting to compare the experiences of US broadcast journalists with journalists outside of the United States to better understand the impact of geography and culture on journalists’ social media experiences.

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