Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte dismissed news from the globally recognised investigative journalism site Rappler as ‘fake news’ (Reporters without Borders 2018a, para. 7). In Ecuador, former president Rafael Correa referred to journalists as ‘liars’, ‘corrupt’, and ‘cowards’ (Waisbord & Amado 2017, 1338). Albanian prime minister Edvin ‘Edi’ Rama often likens journalists to ‘rubbish bins’ (Selva 2020, 11). US president Donald J. Trump tweeted one month into office, ‘The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!’ and then about three years later on 20 March 2020, ‘So much FAKE NEWS!’ Though the US likely is an exception to the extent to which mis/disinformation has been absorbed into the national political scene (Bennett & Livingston 2018), all these cases are glimpses of the verbal and social media assaults on journalists as a wave of populist leaders have been elected around the world, harnessing the energy of disenfranchised voters disgusted with the political establishment (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) in the midst of various crises.

Though the relationship between digital communication and populism has been analysed since the late 1990s (Bimber 1998; Blassnig et al. 2019), this chapter aims to examine additional factors associated with populism, disinformation and online harassment of journalists in an environment of impunity. Though populism has been referenced as a way to bring people together, recent literature largely has linked it to ‘demagogy and propaganda’ (Kavada 2018, 742), ideology, strategy, discourse, political expression, and political logic that often advances the ideal of a political community fighting a common enemy, including the status quo or political elites, often through provocation and breaking taboos (Bulut & Yörük 2017, 4095; De Vrees et al. 2019; Gerbaudo 2018; Krämer 2018). This popular discourse often constructs various publics as a collective, essentialising and associating the opposition with anti-intellectualism, at times, or conspiracy theories that focus on power structures of privilege and long-held institutional values (Krämer 2014, 44). This onslaught of collective blame and furor has often targeted journalism and other institutions, leading to decreases in trust in the credibility of news media over time (Bennett & Livingston 2018).
Since early in the new millennium, populism largely has been characterised as antagonistic communication, often against journalists based on their coverage (Waisbord & Amado 2017). In fact, populism rejects the public interest model of professional journalism and its core values of independence, and accountability reporting, instead linking it to elite interests and opposition politics (Waisbord 2013, 511), often circumventing mainstream news media and appealing directly to the public. In these fractionalised and polarised political environments around the world where audiences are fragmented and gatekeeping has been stretched (Waisbord 2013), populism has fostered environments of disinformation and misinformation, online and offline. In fact, with populism, institutions and elites are devalued and are bypassed to speak directly to the people using ‘an emotional and moralistic style, plainspoken, sometimes aggressive, but appealing to the commonsense’ (Krämer 2014, 46). Moreover, the very nature of social media makes it in many ways an ideal vehicle for populist politicians to have maximum visibility, harness a ‘mobocratic tendency’, and amplify online crowds through the ‘network effect’, reifying and strengthening nodes in the network to expand the range of connections (Gerbaudo 2018, 750–751).

Though social media has not just been in the province of populists in recent years (Bulut & Yörük 2017), the unmediated format of many social media platforms and the ‘gateless’ opportunity to offer commentary, announce events, and lob caustic language at political adversaries and others has been at the heart of populist movements gaining momentum (Waisbord & Amado 2017, 1342). Social media allows direct access to various publics, providing unfettered platforms to connect to large networks and develop communities with wide reach, all without ‘journalistic interference’ (De Vreese et al. 2018, 428). Twitter, specifically, has been strategic in energising publics (Bulut & Yörük 2017). In recent years, political actors messaging on social media, with largely unregulated ecosystems and growth, have galvanised cycles of mis/disinformation production and reproduction, unencumbered by professional ethics or editorial accountability (Crilley & Gillespie 2019). Countries with high social media use are most at risk for disinformation rapidly spreading. It is there, according to Humprecht et al. (2020, 9), that ‘it is easier for rumor spreaders to build partisan follower networks’. In democracies in Canada and Western Europe, political systems with consensus orientations marked by low levels of political polarisation have tended to have high resilience to online disinformation and hold high levels of media trust, compared with nations with high political polarisation (Humprecht et al. 2020, 15).

The following sections examine how populist rhetoric has moved towards delegitimising journalism through tactics including disinformation and denigration. The chapter then examines literature on how this environment has led to online harassment of journalists around the world. Studies and media advocacy resources are then analysed to examine how this ecosystem of populism and online harassment has impacted journalists in an environment of impunity. Finally, the chapter considers strategies that have been utilised or suggested to combat online harassment of journalists on the path forward.

Populism, the delegitimisation of journalism, and online mis/disinformation issues

It is not uncommon for sycophant echo chambers or so-called ‘populist journalism’ to fill a need, like ‘necessary journalism’ in Venezuela, Nicaragua’s ‘Sandinista journalism’, and other top-down approaches in which state media is re-engineered or advertising is provided based on ‘media patrimonialism’ (Waisbord & Amado 2017, 1333). Media ecologies that foster populism often have fragmented audiences and political polarisation, which often puts publics at risk.
for mistaking disinformation for valid information (Waisbord 2018, 21). In addition to politicians and populist media, citizens may engage in populist rhetoric, which often stresses moral divides, in-groups and out-groups, negative stereotypes, uncivil discourse, political tribalism, and points of no compromise (Hameleers et al. 2018; De Vreese et al. 2018). The ideals of truth, fact-producing public-interest journalism run counter to the populist dictum of truth being dismissed as ideological illusion, and as Waisbord (2018, 29–30), noted, populists often advocate that ‘the people’ do not need mediation or institutional representation from journalists, scientists, universities, or other elites.

The populist perspective on news media is that ‘liberal journalism betrays the people and conspires with, or is instrumentalised by, the ruling elite to manipulate the people’ (Krämer 2018, 454). On the rise in the last five years have been discreet online methods of drowning out and silencing journalists. Initiatives to distract from journalistic content aim to manipulate information, as well as the flow or dissemination of it, and to bury news content with white noise or other distractions (UNESCO 2019). Many nations, including longtime democracies, are witnessing a rise in the amount of disinformation on social media sites, which masks itself in the format of news (Bennett & Livingston 2018). Scholars have noted that this online spread of mis/disinformation has presented a major issue for democracies, and journalism specifically, as inaccurate information lives alongside journalism and often drowns it out with parallel attacks on journalists as producers of ‘fake news’, eroding and slowly delegitimising the profession (Balod & Hameleers 2019).

Scholarship has suggested that some public narratives about social media changed after the election of US president Donald J. Trump in 2016. At this critical juncture, concerns were brought forward about ‘widespread malfeasance on social media – from “fake news”, propaganda, and coordinated disinformation to bot-based media manipulation’ (Lewis & Molyneux 2018, 12). A key concern for various publics across democracies as well has been the apparent difficulty in ascertaining the difference between legitimate news and mis/disinformation masked as news (Crilley & Gillespie 2019). Meantime, some political figures harness the rhetoric of xenophobia, racism, and other ‘isms’ on social media platforms, undermining the trust in and credibility of autonomous news media seeking the truth (Crilley & Gillespie 2019, 174), which has led to a drop in public confidence in the institution of journalism and a crisis of credibility (Lischka 2019). In this environment, online disinformation often is transmitted to pursue political agendas or advance malicious deception (Humprecht et al. 2020).

**Online harassment of journalists: the impact and impunity**

Attacks on journalists in countries around the world have a long offline history. Media ecosystems that are strong generally can absorb a limited number of official attacks (Bennett & Livingston 2018). However, it is indeed something entirely different when networks of social media spread disinformation continuously and carry out sustained attacks on journalists in longtime democracies (Bennett & Livingston 2018, 125). Thus, in recent times, social media is being re-evaluated for its true social impact, after years of being heralded for its capacity to bridge digital divides, advance digital activism, and provide platforms for democratic uprisings. Online disinformation campaigns have confused voters around the world and contributed to mob killings and myriad forms of online harassment and hate speech (Lewis & Molyneux 2018, 12). Though a majority of social media research has been conducted in just over ten years (Lewis & Molyneux 2018, 17), more recent studies have focused on the role of marginalised and opposition groups’ anger in collective actions in social movements online (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). Social media platforms allow virtually anyone to self-publish and to attack journalists online,
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offering an ideal venue for populist leaders and their networks to attack, threaten, and denounce the ‘pro-establishment bias’ of traditional news media (Gerbaudo 2018, 746).

This online harassment has been defined as ‘the repeated or severe targeting of an individual or group in an online setting through harmful behaviors’ (Vilk 2020, 2). Settings for these acts may vary from email to messaging applications (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger) to comment sections of news sites to YouTube pages, book reviews, social media platforms (such as Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook), and blogs (Pen America 2020). Online abuse tactics include hateful speech, threats, ‘dogpiling’2 ‘doxing’3 online impersonation,4 ‘message bombing’,5 ‘Zoom bombing’ (crashing a virtual meeting with harassing behavior or images), and distributing non-consensual intimate images, private or manufactured without consent (Vilk 2020). Twitter trolls are utilised to distract from legitimate discourse to provoke or deceive; these trolls are able to create topics that trend and influence the national agenda (Bulut & Yörük 2017). Social media’s reach makes it difficult to track or monitor deviant activity (Bennett & Livingston 2018). Thus, impunity – exemption from consequences or punishments for these actions – is the norm in cyberspace. In fact, until recently, the online environment enabled abuse (Article 19 2018).

In this environment, online harassment of journalists has manifest in numerous ways, with rape and death threats, cyberbullying, impersonating accounts, obscene video and images, sexist language, disinformation about news reports, and other antisocial behaviours (International Center for Journalists 2018, para. 3). In the Philippines, journalists have become accustomed to death threats (Balod & Hameleers 2019). There, the well-known online Rappler’s editor, Maria Ressa, has received an avalanche of online abuse and has been referred to as ‘ugly’, ‘a dog’, and ‘a snake’ and threatened with rape and murder (Reporters without Borders 2018b, 6).

In 2018, Italian journalist Marilù Mastrogianni received some 7,000 death threats through her news outlet email after reporting on organised crime (McCully 2019). A Finnish journalist who was investigating a troll factory and patterns of fake profiles on the social network of a propaganda project was harassed online for four years in a campaign that included tagging her in memes and messages on social media sites and blaming her for deaths in the Ukraine (McCully 2019, 7). Research has primarily focused on the intimidation and harassment of journalists in autocratic and authoritarian nations and emerging democracies (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring 2016, 880). These studies show that the ways journalists are harassed online can vary and include name-calling, online trolling through constant internet stalking, threats, and shaming (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring 2016, 884).

Online harassment of women journalists has been documented more frequently than of male journalists, who often are attacked because of their coverage (McCully 2019). A study of 19 US on-air journalists found that unwanted sexual advances were the most common form of pervasive online harassment, often daily and frequently multiple times a day (Miller & Lewis 2020). Generally, for men, online harassment surfaced in Facebook comments or on Facebook Messenger while some women journalists received emails with ‘repeated requests for dates, solicitations for sex, compliments about the journalist’s body, and images of male genitalia’ (Miller & Lewis 2020, 11). Media advocacy organisations note that ‘female journalists carry the double burden of being attacked as journalists and attacked as women’ (McCully 2019, 7). In a study of 75 journalists in five countries,6 in which online harassment was similar despite geographic differences, researchers found that many women reported frequent sexist comments, criticism, marginalisation, stereotyping, and threats based on their gender or sexuality, with critiques of their work framed in misogynistic attacks and, at times, accompanied by suggestions of sexual violence (Chen et al. 2018, 2). Amnesty International (2017) found in a computational analysis of 778 journalists’ tweets that female journalists receive hostile, abusive, or hurtful tweets in one
out of fourteen tweets received. In Pakistan, according to one report, 68 percent of journalists have been harassed online (Reporters without Borders 2018b). Across Central and Eastern Europe, among 97 independent journalists responding to a survey about online and offline attacks, nearly two-thirds (64.5 percent) indicated they had been harassed or threatened for their journalistic work and over 8 out of 10 experienced it online (83.3 percent), with 16.7 percent indicating they had experienced being doxed related to their personal information (private life or home address), all posted online (Selva 2020, 13). Almost half indicated that the attacks had gotten worse in the last three years (Selva 2020).

Online harassment has risen in recent years via comment sections under online news articles barraging journalists’ emails and social media accounts with defamatory, threatening, demeaning, or even pornographic material. The reason comment sections are targeted by the ‘dark participation’ of trolls is they are a convenient object of manipulation and hate because they basically offer an already established, large audience “for free” . . . And due to the closure of the journalistic process to very limited walled gardens of user debate, the comment sections are often the only way in. (Quandt 2018, 41)

Journalists who have been harassed online face severe consequences both professionally and personally, not to mention the threat to democratic exchange through disrupting the free flow of information (McCully 2019). This online intimidation also has the potential to place a journalist in physical danger and makes journalists more vulnerable to ‘mob’ action as well as further targeted attacks (UNESCO 2019). Journalists who are attacked or even murdered often were initially targeted by online abuse (UNESCO 2019, 47). The chilling effect of these online attacks of disinformation, threats, and other forms of harassment may impact news reporting and the role of news media in democracies and, in general, create an uncertain and often hostile media ecosystem (Balod & Hameleers 2019). Ultimately, these environments could impact press freedom (McCully 2019) as impunity, which results in enabling abuses and leaves victims without resolution or protection (Article 19 2018), has become a norm. Online anonymity exacerbates the issue, making it difficult to identify online predators and perpetrators of online violence or to redress it, allowing these cyberstalkers to continue trolling with impunity (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2019). Online harassment is above all psychologically damaging and can affect journalists’ ability to concentrate on work as well as to resist pressures for self-censorship (UNESCO 2019). One cross-country study found that online harassment disrupts routine practices and the extent that women journalists can interact with audiences (Chen et al. 2018). Another study of harassment of journalists — online and offline — found that journalists ‘occasionally’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘often’ avoid covering specific issues (26 percent of the time) or groups/people (30 percent of the time) because of the risk or because of being afraid of threats (49 percent of the time) (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring 2016, 888).

In the study of online harassment in the case of 19 US on-air journalists, online criticism in the form of harassment appeared aimed at causing emotional damage (Miller & Lewis 2020). Online harassment, including lobbing criticism at journalists’ physical appearance and threatening journalists’ physical safety, has led researchers to conclude that while online threats don’t involve face-to-face contact, the hateful and sadistic level of the rhetoric can be just as harmful as attacks in person (Miller & Lewis 2020, 11). Unfortunately, harassment of journalists in online environments often is minimised as routine, harmless, or even ‘part of the job’ (UNESCO 2019, 52). In some contexts, journalists somehow do not support one another in this plight. The survey of journalists in Central and Eastern Europe found there was a lack of solidarity among
news organisations and within the industry to ‘help journalists and news organizations prevail when their freedoms are under threat’ to help them improve the environment (Selva 2020, 21).

**Addressing disinformation and online harassment: a way forward**

The rise of populist movements that batter ‘the messenger’ through the onslaught of online harassment via disinformation has led to an erosion in public trust in the institution of the press and a crisis of legitimacy in some journalism communities around the world. Harassment of journalists and news organisations online is not radically different from offline harassment over the years; however, the distances that messages can travel and the capacity of the online multiplier effect is different, as is the veil of protection offered to anonymous perpetrators driven by internet disinhibition; such behaviors often are more radical online than for the same person offline (McCully 2019, 2).

Initiatives are surfacing, albeit slowly, to work towards restoring public legitimacy of the profession when needed and to address the issue of disinformation on social media that has put lives at risk. Some have called on global and national institutions to provide guidance or to regulate social media corporations and to require transparency with political advertisements; others suggest changes that include adjusting algorithms to pull back racist, sexist and other extremist content, calling out disinformation and misinformation in an identifiable way (Crilley & Gillespie 2019, 175). Some social media platforms have tightened rules of engagement in their terms of service, and some jurisdictions have amped up their cyberstalking laws with different interpretations and levels public sector training on protections (Vilk 2020).

There have been some studies that indicate that news outlets’ and other entities’ corrections to disinformation can reduce the impact of it (Chan et al. 2017; Walter & Murphy 2018). However, other research suggests that initial impressions are most enduring (Karlsson et al. 2017). Among the big-picture strategies: when setting the record straight, journalists should always check the claims, avoid the false equivalency of ‘de facto’ minority views, and make corrections of disinformation ‘in a mater-of-fact way, ideally providing substantial explanations, and using sources that are close to populist positions ideologically’ (de Vrees et al. 2019, 244).

Combatting false accusations is another line of defence. One study examined the New York Times strategies in their editorial work to address US president Donald Trump’s onslaught of accusations of ‘fake news’ against the organisation. To defend its legitimacy, the Times used four delegitimising strategies: moral evaluation, ‘negative sarcastic narratives’ that challenge President Trump’s capacity to govern, quoting authorities (such as academics, experts in politics, journalism thought leaders, the public, and autocratic regimes) to show that accusations about ‘fake news’ are methods employed by authoritarian regimes to suppress criticism and defend legitimacy (Lischka 2019, 299). Less frequently, the Times debunked ‘fake news’ accusations by demonstrating that the allegations were factually incorrect and describing the president’s tactic as ‘one of inciting the public against the press’ (Lischka 2019, 299).

Globally, most of the responses to online assaults and disinformation to date have been defensive. One study showed that the ways that journalists dealt with being harassed included installing home alarms, finding other forms of protection, limiting social media work, reporting the abuse or threats to law enforcement, blocking email accounts, restricting comments on online content, and closing down accounts (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring 2016, 887). Chen et al. (2018, 2) have noted that journalists have developed a variety of strategies for dealing with the abuse, including limiting online posts, changing what is reported, and using technological tools to prevent people from posting offensive words on journalists’ public social media pages. Other proactive responses focus on prevention of attacks. Others respond directly to online
harassment through investigating. In the Philippines, for example, after the online editor at the Rappler was harassed online, an investigative team of journalists tracked and then exposed the intimidation (UNESCO 2019). In response to hate speech, disinformation, and other forms of harassment, some social media platforms are partnering with journalism organisations and journalists to work on addressing these issues and to launch new safety tools (UNESCO 2019, 48). For example, innovative applications have been designed to document online incidents through uploading attackers’ email addresses and social media handles; screenshots of dates, messages, and links; and photos, videos, and any other evidence of the threat for authorities (Nelson 2020). Journalism advocacy and support groups also have provided trainings and materials on digital safety.

There also have been calls for media outlets and journalists to reimagine their relationships with the public related to disinformation campaigns. It has been noted that journalists, by training, tend to be hesitant to advocate for themselves yet those days, many suggest, need to be over as the crisis of delegitimisation and online assault have reached critical levels. Selva (2020, 7) recommends that journalists must ‘be prepared [to] talk about the value they provide in society, to convince the public not only to pay for good journalism but to support it when it comes under fire’. Research suggests that going forward, journalists should work to publicly distinguish their role from purveyors of disinformation and combat allegations of disseminating disinformation (Balod & Hameleers 2019, 12). Some news organisation initiatives have included what is now called ‘legitimacy management’, ways for outlets to ‘defend themselves from such accusations’ (Lischka 2019, 288). Moreover, there are times when correcting the record through reporting on disinformation is not enough. Selva (2020, 25) offers that journalists should ‘talk directly to the public, not just about the stories they cover, but about how and why they do the jobs they do’.

A number of initiatives have been moving on national and transnational levels. Survey research with journalists from Central and Eastern Europe also is instructive for considering ways forward. Intervention measures advocated for include changes in laws to ensure that journalists are protected and receive support from transnational press freedom advocacy organisations, that governments from other nations condemn the attacks and urge countries to act on attacks to reduce impunity, and that assistance be provided to defray legal costs for journalists (Selva 2020, 22). Other goals among those in the region include forming peer-to-peer professional networks to take on the online harassers and disinformation abuse campaigns and developing in-house mental health programmes and tools for newsroom staffs, including ‘emotional literacy’ programming about trauma and how to deal with it.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe recommends that countries consider prosecuting the online harassment of journalists through existing harassment laws. This could be accomplished through creating measures that penalise sexual harassment and sexist online harassment, examine laws that address online harassment and amend them when possible to ‘capture the phenomenon of online harassment campaigns/“pile on” harassment’, and adopt tiered approaches to handling online harassment while ensuring that these legal remedies are compatible with freedom of expression guided by international law (McCully 2019, 38). Moreover, law enforcement and prosecutors should investigate online harassment and abuse of journalists when harm is likely and seek other remedies that would not be as costly to journalists as legal procedures may be (McCully 2019). The United Nations has prescribed a number of actions that governments must take to end these online violations, including training law enforcement, judiciaries, journalists, civil society, and other entities on safety standards for freedom of expression (Article 19 2018). Other recommendations include early-warning programmes and rapid interventions for online harassment cases and developing best-practice
approaches to address online harassment coupled with reportage on this major public policy issue of abuse (Reporters without Borders 2018b, 25–27). International organisations as well have been encouraged to urge governments to uphold the same protections of rights online as offline and to monitor, investigate, prosecute, and research abuses against journalists online (Article 19 2018).

In conclusion, rising populism, the growth of mis/disinformation on social media, and impunity around online abuse are growing issues for journalists and the legitimacy of the institution of the press. Journalists, advocacy institutions, civil society organisations, governments, and other entities must take an active role in addressing the issue as it evolves over time. Defensive approaches have their place. However, proactive measures such as developing strategies to directly communicate the value of journalism to the public, as well as ways to filter out the rising and competing white noise of disinformation, are critical to the future of democracies.

Notes

1 The chapter defines misinformation as information that is not supported by evidence yet is not necessarily intentionally incorrect (Balod & Hameleers 2019). Disinformation in this chapter is strategically disseminated false information that aims to cause harm or has a malicious intent (Humprecht et al. 2020).

2 This is an attack that is coordinated to overwhelm journalists or other victims of abuse with insults, slurs, threats, and numerous other tactics (Vilk 2020, 3).

3 Doxing is when sensitive personal information is published to extort, intimidate, steal an identity, rally, abuse, or other tactics (Vilk 2020, 3).

4 This is a hoax account that has been created to post offensive material or discredit or defame a name (Vilk 2020, 4).

5 This tactic is designed to flood journalists’ or other victims’ email or phone accounts to block access by others (Vilk 2020, 4).

6 Countries in the study were Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

References


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