Preventing Online Harassment and Promoting Freedom of Expression

Draft IFJ Online Harassment Social Media Policy
(for media houses)

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) and the Southeast Asia Journalist Unions (SEAJU), the collective voice of journalists in the Asia-Pacific, recognise the growing extent of online harassment and abuse against media workers and its disproportionate targeting of women journalists. The IFJ Online Harassment Social Media Policy has been developed in acknowledgement that the struggle to protect freedom of expression in the online space can only be won through collaborative action between media houses, unions and associations and journalists.

This policy for media houses sets out the minimum standards, principles and actions needed to tackle and counter online harassment and abuse in the media. It provides guidelines and outlines a practical program of action for media houses in the region to create safe online spaces for the independent expression of news and diverse opinions.

Why this Policy?

In the developing media environment, the impacts and exposure of the online realm are evident. In response to the challenges that come with the rise of social media for official dissemination of news, commentary and opinion, media houses are framing social media policies to regulate the online presence of employees. While such policies are in place, not enough attention is being given to the pressures being faced by media workers as a result of their work in this space.

While the online environment presents great opportunity for media development it also has an ugly side. This is a reality faced by many journalists in the digital space As journalists engage with readers they face harassment, abuse and threats due to their work.

Road map for media houses

This Policy for media houses seeks to lay out a road map to create safe online spaces for open and respectful debate and deal with abuse and harassment faced by their staff, in particular female staff who are too often the subject of gender-based abuse. Guidelines must be flexible and accommodating of diverse experiences and cultural contexts.

Mechanisms for digital safety and freedom from harassment must include:

1. **Raising awareness** among media employees about digital security and safety from harassment and abuse.
2. **Preventive in-house measures** for journalists to secure their communications from surveillance, hacking, doxing, stalking and interference by trolls.
3. **Training** media staff about the tools available for secure and confidential communication; reporting mechanisms on social media platforms and empowering staff to call out online harassment.
4. **Definition** through policies and mechanisms of online hate speech, given that much is expressed under 'freedom of expression' which is hate-filled and even defamatory.
5. **Special cyber cell** set up in every media house to oversee awareness raising, training, support and redress to affected journalists, especially women journalists.
6. **Legal awareness and resources** disseminated so that journalists harassed or abused online can report abuse to moderators of social networking platforms and also the police and relevant cyber crime cells, with support from the employers bring the perpetrators to justice.
7. **Support to writers** (staff as well as those on contract and freelance) who are being harassed online due to stories published in that media house. These measures should include: physical security; legal aid; support to pursue police complaints and in-house or referral services for psychological support and trauma counselling in case of extreme abuse and harassment.
8. **Ensure responsibility** of intermediaries specially in the area of privacy and data protection including 'notice and take down 'regimes.
9. **Response** as an official media house as well as an online community to push back trolling and abuse online. When trolls see that the media house is demonstrably backing their staffer or writer, it helps isolate the troll, instead of the writer. Trolls cannot succeed in isolating their targets if there is a concerted and sustained online response by colleagues and supporters to counter the trolling. Such a responsible and vocal online community response can be an effective push back to mass trolling.
10. **Setting standards** for vibrant and respectful public discourse in comments sections and public fora on the online platforms hosted by the media house; defining and acting against misogyny, casteism, racism and other forms of discrimination.
11. **Moderation** of comments on official media platforms (website and social media pages) by an experienced team of professionals representing gender, race, caste and ethnic diversity. Filtering comments, blocking and taking down abusive comments and discouraging harassment while treading the fine balance between free speech and hate speech, between calling out trolling and abuse and censorship.
12. **Ombudsperson** to look into grievances and render impartial and independent dispute resolution between media owners/employers and journalists affected by online harassment.

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