**Time to Act on Online Harassment**

Canada’s news publishers, who employ 3000 journalists from coast to coast to coast, believe that free speech, journalistic freedom, and a strong, healthy, commercially viable, and fiercely independent media ecosystem are all vital to our democracy.

Canadians rely on their newspapers and news media to be their trusted sources of information, helping them make informed choices and holding people and institutions, including governments and corporations, accountable.

We hope that Parliamentarians will come together and take meaningful action to combat hate speech and other kinds of harmful content online, while ensuring that freedom of expression and free debate are recognized, preserved, and protected.

We are among the country’s leading defenders of freedom of speech. At the same time, as employers, we strive to provide a safe, healthy, and inclusive work environment for our journalists. As businesses who supply news and analysis, we also strive to protect our customers: the public who read our news and engage with us and their fellow readers. We listen to our customers. We take our responsibilities to them and the broader public seriously. We try to build a better common future for all. And we are accountable for both our actions and inaction.

As a business, the news publishing industry remains under threat from unregulated and unchecked social media and online communication service providers. At the same, our journalists and readers face online harm constantly. Ask any journalist, and they’ll tell you that criticism comes with the job. And rightly so. But hate, harassment, and online and physical harm shouldn’t. It comes from the right, the left, and everywhere in between, and its victims are all too often women and racialized journalists.

We are united in supporting our journalists and newsrooms against those who seek to silence them and threaten their safety. Together, we will continue to advocate for industry-wide responses to end this behaviour.

Across the globe, journalists face physical, judicial, and online harm. In addition to harassment from individuals, journalists face sophisticated defamation campaigns to discredit them. These threats, and their potential impact on journalistic freedom of expression, have detrimental implications for society at large.

The findings of a [survey](https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/UNESCO%20Online%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20Journalists%20-%20A%20Global%20Snapshot%20Dec9pm.pdf) conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the International Center for Journalists about online violence against women journalists are alarming: 73 per cent of women respondents said they had experienced online violence; 20 per cent said they had been attacked or abused offline in incidents seeded online; and 41 per cent said they had been the targets of online attacks that appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns.

The impact of this violence on mental health is sobering: 38 per cent missed work; 11 per cent quit their jobs; and two per cent abandoned journalism altogether. It also impacts journalistic practices and audience engagement: 30 per cent self-censor on social media; 20 per cent only ‘broadcast’ and avoid all interaction; and 10 per cent avoid pursuing particular stories.

Like news publishers, online platforms curate content. They reap all the benefits of being a publisher, albeit on much more commercially favourable terms. At present, however, they do not have the same responsibilities and are not held accountable in the many ways that news publishers are in Canada. Indeed, they have allowed fake news and disinformation to proliferate around the globe, and they have profited from it handsomely.

Big Tech has a *societal obligation* to moderate these activities, just as any news publisher does. In the United States, section 230 of the U.S. Communications Decency Act exempts them from liability over hosting user-generated content and from liability when they choose to remove that content. However, global companies operating in Canada are subject to Canadian law and should conduct themselves accordingly.

As advertisers know, these firms have enormous and extremely sophisticated technical prowess. Why then have they failed in their duty as content moderators and allowed harmful content targeted at journalists to be amplified on their platforms?

As a matter of principle, our journalists should be afforded the same protections in the online world as they are in the offline world. Accordingly, we recommend that the Government of Canada explicitly recognize online threats to journalists directly in legislation. At the same time, online platforms should act responsibly. First, they should act upon reports of harassment from news publishers and journalists within 24 hours. Second, they should invest in technology to detect online hate against journalists. Third, they should detail online harm against journalists in their transparency reports. Fourth, they should be held accountable through Canada’s libel, defamation, and hate laws, just as Canada’s news publishers are. Fifth, they should face economic penalties when they fail to comply with Canadian laws. Finally, they should make it hard for internet trolls to ‘profit’ from the monetization of content that harms journalists.

As a society, we need to do everything we can to protect democratic expression, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t protect journalists. All publishers, including internet intermediaries, should be held accountable for harmful content. Canada’s publishers stand with our journalists, who won’t be silenced, and readers, who want to be informed.

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