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# Tackling the emotional toll together: How journalists address harassment with connective practices

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## Abstract

In this article, we examine how journalists address and tackle online harassment by *connective practices* that involve joint action with peers and editors that we find are particularly effective in addressing the emotional effects of harassment. Theoretically, we bridge community of practice research with theories of emotional labour to develop a novel perspective to examine online harassment. Drawing on 22 interviews with Finnish journalists, we find three categories of connective practices that are particularly effective in tackling harassment: (1) supportive connection between the journalist and the editor; (2) shared collegial practices among peers in the newsrooms and (3) emotional engagement among peers outside the newsroom. All three categories illustrate how journalists as a community of practice develop new practices through dynamic processes innovation, improvisation, trial and error, reciprocal learning and mutual engagement. Importantly, emotional labour forms an important dimension of these practices as the journalists jointly address and tackle the emotional effects of harassment. We posit that the effectiveness of these connective practices largely stems from their ability to provide emotional support. While addressing feelings of fear, anger and shame, these shared practices also help consolidate the newly acquired knowledge and the professional identity under attack. Finally, we offer recommendations for newsrooms and journalists on how to collectively counter harassment and develop policies to address it.

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## Keywords

Connective practice, community of practice, emotional labour, emotion, journalism, journalistic work, harassment, online abuse, hate speech, coping

## Introduction

External harassment has become a regular trait of journalistic work as external interference intervenes in journalistic work, delegitimising and silencing individual journalists, pressing them to exclude or include certain topics (Edström, 2016; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016; Preuß, Tetzlaff and Zick, 2017a; Waisbord, 2020; Wolfe, 2019). Especially the online environment has multiplied the forms of harassment (e.g. Hiltunen and Suuronen, 2020; Miller and Lewis, 2020; Obermaier et al., 2018; Stahel and Schoen, 2020) that range from intimidation and personal threats (Edström, 2016; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016) to ‘outrage mobs’ (Ronson, 2015; Waisbord, 2020) often extending into the journalists’ private life (Wolfe, 2019). Harassment often takes place based on group characteristics, like profession, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or politics, and it is also particularly common among female journalists (Chen et al., 2018; Edström, 2016: 98; Miller and Lewis, 2020). Consequently, harassment threatens journalistic autonomy and freedom of speech (Coe et al., 2014; Hawdon et al., 2017: 254; Miller and Lewis, 2020; Obermaier et al., 2018; Stahel and Schoen, 2020; Wolfe, 2019), and it may also disrupt journalists’ engagement with the public, an important part of journalistic work in the new online environment (Chen et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2020).

Yet, relatively little is known about coping with harassment, and what the most effective ways of coping are. In this article, we suggest that while harassment often concerns individual journalists, the most effective practices of countering harassment are *connective practises* that connect the harassed journalists with peers, managers and the wider public, and thus, the emotional strain experienced by individual journalists is tackled as a community.

Theoretically, we bridge theories of community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) with theories of emotional labour (Post and Kepplinger, 2019); we explore how journalists innovate and learn new practises against harassment (Wenger, 1998) through mutual engagement, and how the effectiveness of these practices is premised on their ability to provide emotional support for the individual journalist. With this perspective, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 22 Finnish journalists, we show how *connective practices* that connect the journalist with collegial and editorial support, and where this connection through practice occurs also on an emotional level (see Pratt, 2012), are particularly effective in countering harassment. This is in line with previous studies that suggest journalists favour coping strategies that emphasise support from colleagues and family (Obermaier et al., 2018; Preuß et al., 2017b). According to our findings, the effectiveness of these connective practices stems from their capacity to tackle the emotional toll of harassment. They help journalists to overcome the feelings of isolation,

shame, anger, fear and self-doubt that harassment often evokes, and which can hamper everyday work, but also lead to self-censorship.

Our findings also contribute to studies that recommend measures against harassment ranging from national jurisprudence (Waisbord, 2020) to safety measures (Posetti, 2017) and practising real-life scenarios (Barnes et al., 2016). We recommend that newsroom management could support journalists more effectively by creating a supportive and positive atmosphere where harassment, isolation and shame can be discussed openly.

## Professional community of practice responding to online harassment

Work on communities of practice (CoP) investigates how people develop new practices through mutual engagement. The concept CoP has been employed to examine a wide spectrum of groups of people who are engaged in a joint enterprise where they share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015; see also Lave and Wenger, 1991). Perhaps the most typical examples of CoP are different professions; occupational skills and practices are built in everyday work and transferred to newcomers as tacit practices, conventions, rules of thumb, embodied understandings and shared worldviews (Amin and Roberts, 2008; Bleakley, 2002; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice thus provide a platform for situated, social learning processes that take place in participation (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Gherardi, 2009; Koliba and Gajda, 2009).

Similarly, journalists can be seen as a community of practice (Hutchins and Boyle, 2017; Meltzer and Martik, 2017; Värk and Kindsiko, 2019). In this article, we examine how journalists have entered a process whereby journalists and newsrooms develop new practices through mutual engagement to counter the emotional effects of harassment and hate speech. Here, we consider three characteristics as vital from a CoP perspective.

Communities of practice often work through *mutual engagement in practices and talk*. Studies have demonstrated how many professions – such as copier repairmen (Orr, 1996), insurance agents (Linde, 2009), anaesthesiologists (Iedema et al., 2009), attorneys (Maynard, 1988) and juvenile probation officers (1990) – build professional know-how and learn new practices through dialogue, by telling stories and forming lessons learned from their experience. This talk often circulates in the organisation out of view of the management, thus hiding from formal control (Orr, 2006: 1807). Somewhat similarly, as Zelizer (1993) argued early on, journalists adapt to new developments through mutual talk revolving around key events which are debated to create new understandings and practices (Zelizer, 1993: 224). Following this, we focus on the informal accounts shared by the journalists, the tacit knowledge and best practices that emerge in these accounts on harassment (Gabbay and Le May, 2004; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2002).

Communities of practice are also dynamic (Iedema et al., 2005; Wenger, 1998) and learn through *incremental learning and improvisation* (Orr, 1996), by innovating new practices as people try to solve problems together in their everyday work (Gherardi et al., 1998; Wenger, 2000). Online harassment, too, is likely to incite dynamic processes of trial and error; forming a community of practitioners (Gherardi, 2006: 110), journalists

accumulate wisdom as they try out new ways of addressing harassment, which gradually turn into accustomed ways of doing things. We examine this incremental learning by tracing the trial-and-error experiences of the journalists and the resulting rules of thumb and best practices (Gabbay and Le May, 2004; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2002).

Finally, we suggest that *emotional engagement* is essential in the operation of CoP (see also Pratt, 2012), being joint enterprises relying on mutual recognition, sense of belonging and trust (Wenger, 1998: 125; Wheatley, 2000). Professionals participating in a community of practice often feel connected to others as well as their leaders (Wheatley, 2000), being committed to joint tasks to the extent of being passionately involved in professional work (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Furthermore, as positive emotions and problem-focussed practices have been found to support coping with difficulties (see Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000), studying emotions in the context of harassment offers a promising way of examining how to best address and cope with harassment. Emotions also play a substantial role in journalistic work (e.g. see Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2021), not least because journalists, too, need to exercise emotional labour, a term originally coined by Hochschild (1983) to capture emotion management in work-related contexts as individuals try to demonstrate proper professional behaviour. For journalists, emotional labour takes place both in everyday work (Hopper and Huxford, 2015; Thomson, 2021) and in traumatic events (Richards and Rees, 2011; Jukes, 2017), but also in the context of harassment (Miller and Lewis, 2020).

Harassment instigates emotional labour in those affected by it as it may incite anger, fear or shame (Ronson, 2015; Waisbord, 2020), and journalists might even blame themselves to the extent that the experiences can become emotionally traumatic (Post and Kepplinger, 2019). Reactions also vary; while some journalists feel powerless (Binns, 2017), others consider public aggression a ‘badge of honour’ (Lischka, 2017) signalling strength of character (Obermaier et al., 2018; Post and Kepplinger, 2019).

Yet, as emotional labour has been studied predominantly as something that individuals do (see however Thomson 2021: 967), we adopt a CoP perspective and show how emotional labour constitutes an important dimension of journalists’ collective coping. In what follows, we analyse the interviews to show how journalists jointly develop practices to tackle harassment by mutual talk, by dynamic experimenting with and mutual engagement in these new practices and by sharing experiences. We also examine the emotions that surfaced in the interviews and how these were dealt with in the process.

## Data and analysis

Empirically, we draw on 22 semi-structured thematic interviews with Finnish journalists of which six were male and 16 female. The interviews were conducted between autumn 2019 and spring 2020, each interview typically lasting 1 h, although some were longer, up to two and a half hours. We sampled our interviewees by approaching the main newsrooms, seeking journalists with experiences of harassment, as well as journalists involved in addressing harassment in the newsroom as editorial journalists. By focussing on these two groups, we were able to find first-hand experiences from journalists at the forefront of tackling harassment.

The journalistic focus of the respondents ranged from foreign politics and domestic affairs to crime and lifestyle coverage. The age range is approximated to be between 25 to 55 years. Both in-house and freelance journalists were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and Swedish in two locations, university premises and journalists' workplace.

The interviews focussed on experiences of harassment and responses to it: when harassment started, what types of harassment the journalists had faced, how they responded and how responses changed over time, and what possible consequences harassment had on the journalists' working style or repertoire, or their personal life. Finally, the joint practices journalists engage in to cope with intimidation were discussed.

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The interviews were analysed focussing on responses to harassment and coded according to different types of responses and their effectiveness in tackling harassment. Next, we focus on the journalists' experiences in tackling harassment, paying special attention to the deemed effectiveness of different joint practices.

## Findings

The journalists interviewed emphasised that not all criticism is harassment; as journalists cover highly contested matters, feedback is part of the job. At the same time, journalists described how they increasingly receive personal insults aiming to defame them. In the interviews, we found two critical incidents or hot moments (Zelizer 1993: 224): the European refugee crisis following the Syrian war and Russian politics clearly incited more harassment, prompting journalists to discuss and try out practices to tackle it. However, many journalists describe harassment as a regular feature of their work.

Journalists also recounted facing multiple forms of harassment. Harassers contact journalists directly via work phone, personal email or social media channels. Harassment may also extend into public places where journalists are attacked verbally or followed, or otherwise approached aggressively. Harassment is often personal, involving implicit (e.g. warning of walking alone in the evening) or explicit threats of violence (e.g. death threats). Sometimes mobs flood journalists' email or social media accounts, circulate false accusations or target journalists' superiors or family and friends. The female journalists described more aggressive and serious forms of harassment that, on occasion, lasted months, even years. Harassment involved name calling (e.g. 'a fucking whore') and graphically violent content; for example, some journalists had been edited into obscene or violent material (harassers use photos they steal from journalists' social media accounts). Some harassers also recorded journalists on video and shared these online.

Regarding the consequences of harassment, isolation and loneliness surfaced as major issues, especially for journalists more severely affected by harassment. As one journalist (J12) recalls: 'I felt really lonely and started to question myself, thinking maybe I deserve this, maybe it's my fault, maybe I made a mistake. Things like that. Blaming myself, doubting myself'. Loneliness takes many forms from not being able to talk about one's experiences to worries over one's career and professional credibility. Shame often underlies loneliness; some journalists feel ashamed of being harassed in the first place,

directing responsibility onto themselves, while others feel perhaps they could have somehow prevented harassment. The prolonged emotional effects include depression and inability to work, self-censorship and avoidance of sensitive topics, affecting one's professional identity.

Thus, what could help? As we first analysed and coded how journalists discussed the outcomes of harassment, we started to see that effective solutions typically involved a reciprocal relationship with others. Effective solutions often entailed colleagues, peers, editors or other significant actors who were instrumental in alleviating the impact of harassment, particularly the emotional strain it causes, which was judged to be one of the most detrimental effects of harassment. Therefore, in the second coding, we focussed on the most effective solutions and the role of emotions to examine emotional labour in these experiences. Next, we present the three main forms of connective practices that clearly build on the connection the journalist is able to make with others: (1) editorial support, (2) collegial practices and (3) peer support outside the newsroom.

#### (1) Editorial support: intervention, protection and acknowledgement

Many newsrooms have formal guidelines regarding reporting harassment to one's superiors. Other means of intervention include moderation practices on social media sites, IT personnel in media houses tracking and profiling harmful accounts, as well as company lawyers taking the cases to the police. All this is deemed important by journalists who see that media houses should be able to protect journalists so they do not have to be afraid of writing on a certain topic.

In the journalists' accounts, editors play the most critical role in establishing both formal and informal practices in the newsroom; they define how harassment is addressed, but also how openly it is discussed. One of the unwritten newsroom rules refers to how editors should always stand up for the journalists: 'As long as the story is not published, the editor sides with the readers, but as soon as it's out, they stand with the journalist' (J13). This fundamental dictum of the profession also applies in the context of harassment; a journalist (J4) working in a national broadcasting company notes: 'It would be totally horrendous if your employer did not support you when you are being attacked'.

Emotional support and emotional connection come across as central features in the successful practices of editors. As one journalist (16) emphasises, it is the editor's 'job to personally intervene in these shitstorms, either via their Twitter account or some other social media channel and take some of the burden'. Editors are in a key position in addressing the feelings of shame and inadequacy as they set the tone of the informal newsroom culture, signalling whether harassment is taken seriously. A journalist (J2) from a prominent daily describes how, at first, there were no guidelines on how to handle harassment and the editors did not take the issue seriously or express their support in any way: 'It is terribly important that your superior and the editor-in-chief support you, if not publicly, then at least privately'. Informal practices, such as a simple pat on the back, or just talking to and acknowledging the journalist and what they are going through provide emotional support and security, which also helps sustain one's professional identity. Indeed, journalists who have been able to treat harassment as not posing a substantial

threat typically have an open and well-working relation with the editors. One journalist (J16) fondly remembers an editor-in-chief who intervened when the journalist was attacked:

I've been lucky to have an editor with a background in a tabloid who has already witnessed many shitstorms. She knows how it is and we have talked about it a lot. You should always talk to your boss and make sure they know what's going on, and make sure everyone around you knows what you are dealing with.

Editors' stance and actions are deemed important also because they have power over journalists' careers. If harassment is not discussed openly and the journalists feel embarrassed, they might think harassment poses a potential career risk as it might tarnish their professional reputation if they are labelled 'weak' and not able to handle feedback. As one journalist (J1) explains: 'You have to remember that journalists compete with each other over stories and prizes, and if you want to make it in the field, you can't appear to be a whining complainer'.

Finally, a notable aspect of harassment is that it affects journalists unequally. The differing experiences may exacerbate feelings of isolation as some, often women, are targeted by mobs while others are not. Editors' support is deemed especially important by female journalists more seriously affected.

## (2) Collegial practices: calmness, assertiveness and humour

Besides editorial actions and newsroom policies, journalists try out different responses that gradually develop into lessons learned, rules of thumb and best practices. The interviews show a rich array of innovative, improvised solutions aimed at combatting external interference and harassment developed ad hoc among colleagues as journalists share their feelings or experiences amid work routines (Wenger, 1998). Many tactics are also developed by trial and error, and though not formally coded, are clearly patterned and repeated by many, thus constituting tacit knowledge incrementally gained from learning through participation in these practices (see Farnsworth et al., 2016). Parallel to this, many formal practices, such as moderation, have often evolved gradually through the need to respond to hostile audience feedback.

Most commonly, the journalists try to stay calm in the face of aggression. As one journalist (J1) suggests, a friendly, matter-of-fact response often leads to best results. For example, when at the time of the Syrian war, the newsroom was flooded with feedback, the journalist (J1) kindly replied to all the emails, thanking for the constructive feedback; with this, the journalist wanted to show that 'there is a human being at the other end' receiving the hostility.

Calmness can be also seen as a form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), fitting well with the norm of objectivity and professionalism of journalism where objectivity has historically been a constitutive professional norm (Kantola, 2016; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2013, 2020), with emphasis on factuality even when emotional labour is required (Hopper and Huxford, 2015; Richards and Rees, 2011: 851). As Jukes (2017) describes, journalists as



professionals committed to objectivity have developed a ‘cool-detached’ approach to shield themselves from the emotional impact of news events. In the case of harassment, the principle of calm talk is a jointly agreed practice in newsrooms:

Even if the messages are angry or unpleasant, we reply. It’s usually sufficient. It is often the case that when people send something in an emotional state, when they get a reply, they tend to feel a little embarrassed about the language they’ve used. The response we then get is usually much more atoning (J9).

According to the journalist (J9), replying calmly usually works, even when discussion with audience members or those implicated in the story is warranted, noting that: ‘Even with a member of a motorcycle club, when you have a conversation with them and explain the reasons why the journalists did what they did, 95 percent of the cases are resolved’.

Indeed, many journalists suggest that the digital environment comes with more pressure and requires the ability to monitor one’s state of mind and manage one’s emotions, that is, engage in emotional labour. One journalist (J7) working in a broadcasting company has come to think of responding to audience aggression as a professional challenge and has been experimenting with different ways of replying, trying to develop effective practices to calm down audience members. The journalist (J7) also shares the practices found useful with others and has used these when responding to hate mails sent to his boss:

Sometimes I’m given messages sent to my boss to handle, and I might test different tactics in replying. Based on the message, I try to figure out the best way to reply to the individual so that they would feel heard.

The journalist (J7) used to have long discussions with audience members at the beginning of his career, wanting to set things right; however, he used to feel regret after replying in a mean way. Wanting to avoid this, his rule of thumb now is: ‘If you start to feel provoked, close your computer and turn off your phone for a while’. This rule of thumb is echoed by many of his colleagues, and many have come up with various innovative practices to overcome their spontaneous reactions; a tabloid journalist (J17) developed the practice of time-outs:

I take a timeout. If there’s a comment on Twitter, I don’t have to reply the same day if I’m tired or stressed out. I can answer tomorrow. Or the day after that. When I have calmed down, so I don’t unintentionally use careless phrases or obscene language.

Her lesson learned, which she repeats to herself, is ‘I will not be provoked when someone tries to provoke me’. Yet, another journalist (J2) recalls how, after appearing in a talk show, she started to turn off her phone after the show:

I developed this habit of turning off my phone for a couple of hours after the show, and then deleted all the voice messages, without listening to them. So, my phone was either on mute or off, yet the calls kept coming in, messages pouring in.

The journalist (J2) also gave the callers' phone numbers to the company security personnel, considering tracing the callers: 'But then I thought I wouldn't do it. I just don't have the resources or the energy for that. If someone else wants to do it, it's up to them, but I decided not to continue with it'.

At the core of these practices is dealing with the difficult emotions harassment causes. Many journalists try to control their emotions by controlling their response: many refrain from replying regardless how tempting it is. One journalist (J4) describes how she decided not to reply at all, instead consciously learning to resist the temptation of getting involved:

Sometimes I feel like replying, but then I put the phone away. Generally, if I get criticism after my story comes out, the first thing that comes to mind is to reply in equal measure...but then I rethink it. I have on occasion even written the reply, but then decided not to send it. I don't get involved, because once you do, it's an endless cycle.

Similarly, a journalist (J16) covering Russian affairs learned to resist getting into arguments with harassers:

They [the harassers] change their target every second day. In my experience, if you don't show them what they say hurts, they quickly leave you alone. It's like school bullying.

Many journalists use the help of colleagues in restricting exposure to harassment, and collegial support is highly valued: 'Support from colleagues is much more important than support from people on social media' (J8). Peer support is a common way of dealing with harassment as many find it important to have someone they can talk to: 'We do sometimes talk about things like harassment with colleagues, mainly I talk to my closest colleague, and if there's a bad case, we go through it. Peer support is important because they have also experienced harassment' (J9).

Many journalists control the time when they read feedback. A journalist (J19) who covered the 2015 refugee crisis notes:

Never let them control your timetable. If a troll writes an offensive piece on you on Friday noon, don't interrupt everything to go read it, it'll spoil the rest of the day. Just give the link to your colleague and have a cup of coffee, have a nice weekend, and get back to it the next week if you feel like it.

Journalists also check each other's social media accounts and clean up abusive messages, so they don't have to face harassment aimed at them personally:

We deal with it together. Sometimes we moderate each other's accounts, so if my friend becomes a subject of a bigger wave of abuse, I go through her accounts, remove or save the

messages, just generally clean it up. And she does the same for me. This way neither of us has to face it, because when it's aimed at someone else, it's not that serious. I mean, it doesn't get to you the same way. So, you should seek peer support, then you don't have to read the messages sent to you, there is someone else to do it (J2).

Besides managing one's hard emotions, journalists also employ more assertive tactics. While still wanting to appear calm, they might adopt strategies to block the harassers or make direct contact with them. A journalist (J10) with a large following on Twitter explains how she refuses to give harassers the podium: 'Twitter has been pretty good since I blocked the worst trolls, I think, it's surprising how it clears the air'. Reporting improper tweets to Twitter and blocking trolls outright tends to improve the conversation. Another common practice is making one's social media accounts private. One journalist (J13) explains how after covering the Syrian war and the refugee crisis she learned to protect her accounts; she now restricts her social media to family and friends and no longer shares any personal information.

Others try out even more assertive tactics; a journalist (J2) working in broadcasting remembers replying to the people sending threatening messages, even calling them. On Twitter, she first replied wittily with helpline numbers, but soon got frustrated and started blocking the harassers. At some point she even called the harasser's wife, which put an end to harassment. Her lesson learned was that assertiveness pays off; once a harasser emailed her after being blocked, saying how he had enjoyed the journalist's tweets. Agreeing to behave, the journalist unblocked him.

Perhaps surprisingly, some journalists engage in direct contact, a newly developed practice that includes meeting with the harasser(s) or otherwise confronting them. A direct encounter or a conversation usually ends well, allowing a more constructive way of letting out steam. A journalist (J18) covering Russian affairs met up with a person running a social media site used by trolls to discuss harassment and moderation practices. After a fruitful conversation, moderation on the site became stricter and harassment against the journalist lessened. Another journalist (J7) similarly describes how he organised a meeting with the harasser who threatened him and his family; the meeting was beneficial for both as the journalist no longer felt threatened and the harasser apologised, admitting he did not quite understand why he had sent all the intimidating messages. One journalist (J16) from a current affairs magazine explains how he has confronted harassers following him on the street, telling them to 'fuck off'. Although direct confrontation gave him a momentary sense of accomplishment, it was often followed by a sense of emptiness. He thus urges others to think carefully before confrontation.

Finally, many journalists name humour as a useful way of coping with harassment (see also Pratt, 2012). Indeed, humour can be seen as an emotion-based, connective practice: joking with colleagues is a way of emotional bonding, but also of collective coping, providing an opportunity to vent. Sometimes absurd humour works best; one journalist (J3) tells of an image of a penis inside a pack of sausages sent to the newsroom that became a running joke, humour lessening the effects of the abusive message. Similarly, in another newsroom, a journalist installed 'a wall of shame' where they all pinned their

worst mistakes for everyone to see with snippets of related abusive comments. With humour, they were able to laugh at the vitriol and aggression together.

Innovative practices include integrating tips received elsewhere; for example, a journalist (J16) working in warzones explains how the strategies used with terrorists also work with harassers:

If different radicalised groups approach you trying to kidnap you, [the guidelines explain] what will happen and what the reactions they expect from you are, so all the same principles we received in training seem to work with online harassment. Rather use irony, humour and laughter than start screaming for help. Particularly, showing you're scared is like a trophy to them.

One journalist (J2) made hate mails public on a blog, asking celebrities to assess them and pick the best one; the blog became overwhelmingly popular, and the money thus collected was used for schoolbooks for a refugee reception centre. Many interviewees think that making abusive messages public decreases the impact while also allowing support from the public.

### (3) Peer support outside the newsroom: emotional engagement and venting of feelings

Harassment has prompted journalists to actively develop practices that extend beyond the immediate workplace relations and connect them with other peers, for example, by networking and establishing support groups. Again, emotional management emerges as the main benefit of these connective practices.

Quite a few journalists have sought professional therapy, either provided by the media house or finding one on their own. For instance, some journalists found that NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) provided them with tools for coping with harassment and the intense pace of the workplace, while some have participated in peer support groups on social media. These peer support practices are based on mutual trust, collegiality and emotional bonding. The group thus provides a professional backstage for venting one's feelings without the need to explain:

Peer support is extremely important. I've helped set up a social media support group for people affected by harassment. The members have found it very important to be able to share their experiences with others who get it, because many people just don't get it. Peer support allows using humour as a coping mechanism, and in this [collegial] setting, it is possible to use dark humour, too (J12).

Many journalists emphasise the importance of the more informal support from colleagues as trusted friends who help put anxieties and self-doubt into perspective:

I have a few trusted colleagues I can call if I get anxious, who I can openly tell that perhaps I've made a mistake, and that's why they're attacking me on social media. And because they

work in the same industry, they understand and they're able to say the right words. That "you didn't make a mistake", or "that could happen to anyone". Or, if there really is something to fix, they still help, saying "then we fix it, no big deal, you're just human and humans make mistakes, we all make mistakes and we have all been through having to fix things". That helps (J13).

The same journalist (J13) explains how she went to see a psychologist just to vent, and how seeing a professional liberated her to talk openly, making her realise how consuming it is to try and work out the bad feelings alone:

I always feel relieved and somehow liberated after sharing these thoughts with someone. I firmly believe it's worth going to talk with a professional, and I tell my colleagues this, too. It's good to talk to someone who knows how it works, and what kinds of feelings you might have. Generally speaking, it's worth being open, to discuss these things very openly. In my opinion, it's the best advice. And to talk to a professional.

## Summary of the results

The results suggest that journalists have developed multiple connective practices to counter harassment. These practises connect journalists with their peers, editors and other significant actors, as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), and facilitate developing and sharing new practices against harassment through improvisation, innovation, testing and mutual sharing. This allows the journalists to learn together and consolidate the acquired knowledge.

These connective practices are particularly relevant and effective in addressing the difficult emotions caused by harassment, not least because the collective aspect adds positive emotions and problem-orientated tasks into the practices of countering, both found beneficial in the process of coping (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). In our empirical analysis, we found three main categories of these connective practices. First, editorial support in the newsroom plays a central role as editors can intervene in harassment, protect journalists and moreover, just acknowledge harassment as a relevant issue. Indeed, editors are key figures in setting the emotional tone in the newsroom as harassment often singles out individual journalists who might fear jeopardising their careers when revealing harassment. Second, collegial practices in the newsroom help to manage the emotional strain as they allow addressing harassment in multiple ways. Journalists employ calmness, assertiveness and humour in various practices, which help overcome the emotional strain caused by harassment. Third, emotional engagement among peers outside the newsroom provides additional emotional support and the opportunity of being heard and understood; peer groups and other contacts provide opportunities for emotional bonding, connection and venting of feelings that help negotiate the effects of harassment.

These practises are essential as they enable the journalists to continue in their profession. While these practices address and help manage the difficult emotions – anger, fear and shame – at the same time they also help consolidate the newly acquired knowledge

and the professional identity under attack. In more tangible terms, they thus address the threats harassment poses to journalism and freedom of speech arising from self-censorship and avoidance of sensitive or contested topics. Indeed, in our study, journalists who were more severely affected recalled avoiding sensitive topics, with some even leaving the profession altogether; importantly, these journalists talk about loneliness, lack of both collegial and editorial support, and how they felt they had to keep their experiences of harassment to themselves.

Many studies have pointed out how female journalists have been subjected to the more serious forms of harassment (e.g. [Chen et al., 2018](#); [Lewis et al., 2020](#); [Miller and Lewis, 2020](#); [Pew Research Center, 2014](#)). In our material, female journalists more often than male journalists were subjected to the more serious forms of harassment. Yet, in coping with harassment, gender differences did not emerge as a crucial factor. Both female and male journalists were engaged in joint action and exercised emotional labour. As our interviews did not focus particularly on the gendered experience, we can thus only suggest that effective connective practices are not restricted to a specific gender.

## Conclusions

Our study shows how the new forms of online harassment that have emerged along with new media have become a significant issue for journalists. Professions often form CoP ([Orr, 1996, 2006](#)) and journalists are no exception; CoP are dynamic, they cross institutional borders and, crucially, involve informal practices and tacit knowledge that complement the official institutional practices. Dealing with online harassment has clearly propelled a process of incremental learning in newsrooms as journalists develop new practices and codes by trial and error, by reciprocal learning and by circulating best practices within the professional community ([Gherardi et al., 1998](#); [Orr, 1996](#); [Wenger, 2000](#)). In the context of addressing harassment, these practices often take the shape of connective practices, meaning the joint action whereby tacit knowledge and experiences are shared with colleagues and editors in the flow of everyday work, and sometimes also outside the workplace among peers.

Our study highlights the importance of the emotional dimension of harassment. We have drawn on the work on emotional labour ([Hochschild, 1983](#)), which helps to show how journalists manage their emotions in the face of harassment. Journalism has had a somewhat ambiguous relation with emotion as journalists tend to appear as objective professionals ([Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2021](#)). Yet, recent studies have pointed out that journalists, too, engage in emotional labour ([Hopper and Huxford 2015](#); [Jukes, 2017](#); [Richards and Rees, 2011](#); [Thomson, 2021](#)) that includes harassment ([Miller and Lewis, 2020](#)). Similarly in our study, difficult feelings come across as the main challenge of harassment. Here, our study bridges theories of CoP with those on emotional labour. Our findings suggest that CoP, and in our case the connective practices they develop, are particularly effective as they address and help to manage the emotional strain of harassment. Moreover, journalists are not passive, but actively engage in developing useful ways of countering harassment together and often these tactics address the emotional effects of harassment. Journalists discuss, invent and try out various tactics, such as

humour, or consciously limiting exposure to harmful feedback, or they seek collegial help in managing abusive comments, blocking harassers, or they might even confront harassers with assertiveness.

On one hand, our study thus contributes to work on CoP by highlighting the emotional dimension in the workings of CoP. We suggest that the ability to address and deal with emotions is a critical dimension of CoP and perhaps even a key for the successful workings of CoP (e.g. [Värk and Kindsiko, 2019](#)). Thus, we suggest that emotions should be considered in future studies on CoP. On the other hand, we contribute to the ongoing work on emotional labour by suggesting that it is not only something that individuals do, but rather takes place jointly in shared practices, in this case within the professional community of practice. It is also important to note that this form of emotional labour discussed in this paper does not stem from the employer's demands of proper emotional conduct per se ([Hochschild, 1983](#)), but rather, from the journalists' efforts at maintaining proper professional conduct and their professional identity, but also from the need to be able to continue in the profession.

Moreover, in more practical terms, we suggest that acknowledging the emotional dynamics in the newsroom can strengthen journalists' ability to work. While the online environment can be a source of emotional strain, at the same time, the digital affect cultures fostered by social media often afford emotions of solidarity and facilitate coping with disruptive events ([Döveling et al., 2018](#)). Similarly, in newsrooms, various practices have been found salient in dealing with the emotional effects of harassment. Accordingly, newsrooms and other institutions should not only develop formal procedures for tackling harassment, but also maintain an open atmosphere where harassment can be discussed openly among colleagues. Editors in leading positions should thus clearly signal that harassment is addressed jointly and that those affected will receive support both formally and informally. Trade unions and other professional societies could also make a difference by developing shared standards and by encouraging peer support groups which are effective avenues for sharing and venting the sometimes absurd and difficult experiences. Indeed, according to earlier studies, there is a lack of training in dealing with the emotional dimension of journalistic work ([Richards and Rees, 2011](#); [Wolfe, 2019](#)) and our results resonate with these.

Further studies could explore these various practices in distinct contexts, but also across countries. Harassment comes in many forms ranging from occasional and seemingly random incidents (often related to a single published story, for example) to persistent individual harassers or mobs targeting individual journalists on a continued basis. Further research would need to acknowledge these different forms of harassment and investigate both their consequences and the effective means of tackling them.

In this paper, the empirical focus on Finland could be a limitation. As the study was conducted in the main Finnish newsrooms, which closely follow the developments of their counterparts in the Western countries regarding newsroom management and journalistic practices, similar developments might take place in other countries as well. However, it might be that the characteristics of Finnish working culture, such as relatively low hierarchies and emphasis on teamwork, play a role; for instance, Finnish employees typically feel they receive collegial help and are able to contribute to important decisions

in the workplace (Eurofound, 2016; Sutela et al., 2019: 13, 166). Moreover, the strong prevalence of trade unions in Finland may encourage connective action among journalists. Comparative studies on workplace cultures would thus be an important addition to the literature.

Furthermore, future studies could employ research methods that better capture the communal and collegial aspects of working life. As similar collective practices have not been found in other studies, it may have to do with methods with surveys and one-to-one interviews having been the dominant methods in studies of harassment. Methods such as focus group interviews, ethnography or participant observation might better grasp the joint practices and action in professional communities, including journalism.

Finally, the study has shown how journalists creatively come up with new inventions in their everyday work – it is likely that this inventiveness is not restricted to the realm of harassment, but rather that journalists as a community of practice engage in similar processes of innovation (see also Schmitz Weiss and Domingo, 2010) regarding other aspects of their work. It would thus be interesting to learn more about the inner dynamics and creativity of the profession.

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