



Addressing Online Harassment in Swedish Journalism: An Institutional Perspective on Management¹

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ABSTRACT

This study scrutinizes Swedish news organizations' strategies to navigate the psychosocial implications of online harassment toward journalists, drawing from interviews with 14 media managers across local and national media outlets. Employing institutional theory, the findings highlight managerial prioritization of physical safety, while concurrently undervaluing the mental strain induced by subtle online harassment, viewed as an occupational hazard intrinsic to the profession. Consequently, their comprehension of work environment responsibilities is shaped through their cognitive assimilation, influenced by their sociocultural environment and industry affiliation, which precludes them from recognizing online harassment as an organizational challenge. This, in turn, hinders a systematic and reflexive approach toward managing the multifaceted manifestations of online harassment. The significance of the study transcends merely identifying barriers, offering insights into the underlying institutional structures and practices that perpetuate them. These insights are pivotal for devising strategies that mitigate the detrimental impacts of online harassment in journalism.

KEYWORDS

Employer perspectives / institutional theory / interview study / journalism / news organizations / online harassment / occupational health / psychosocial work environment / work environment responsibility

Introduction

Violence and bullying have been recognized as significant occupational hazards in the working life sciences for at least the past three decades (Boudrias et al. 2021; Guay et al. 2015; McDonald 2012; Nielsen et al. 2010; Nyberg et al. 2021). Extensive research has been conducted to better understand these issues, particularly within the human services sector, including healthcare, social care, education, and social services (ibid). This body of research has firmly established that physical and psychological pressures are potent stressors that adversely impact employees' mental health and organizational productivity (Boudrias et al. 2021; Nyberg et al. 2021). Over the past 10–15 years, cyberbullying has also become a pervasive topic of research due to the increasing usage of digital communications in the workplace (e.g., Forssell 2019, 2020; Kowalski et al. 2012; Privitera & Campbell 2009); this has broadened the previously dominant focus on the public sector to include a much more comprehensive range of workplaces and organizations.

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In light of these developments, there has been a heightened awareness regarding the work environments of professionals such as journalists (Binns 2017; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring 2016; Waisbord 2020), politicians (Theocharis et al. 2016; Tromble & Koole 2020; Wagner 2020), and academics (Barlow & Awan 2016; Ferber 2018; Gosse et al. 2021; Oksanen et al. 2022), who face online harassment due to their occupational activities. While the growing scholarly attention to the challenges faced by these critical democratic professions is heartening, it is concerning that recent research indicates journalists often perceive news organizations as ill-equipped to understand and adapt work practices to address the psychological challenges stemming from increased online harassment (Eberspacher 2019; Everbach 2022; Holton et al. 2021; Malcorps et al. 2022; Miller 2021; Nelson 2022). These studies suggest that journalists feel their employers do not have a comprehensive plan to combat online harassment, that such exposure is a natural facet of their job, and that they, therefore, frequently withhold their feelings when overwhelmed by emotional strain. Echoing this sentiment, Nordic studies, such as those by Hiltunen and Suuronen (2022), Kantola and Harju (2023), Celuch et al. (2023), and Hagen (2015), underscore the importance of a systematic approach. They particularly stress the need for nurturing transparent and supportive bonds between journalists, their editors, and employers, as well as promoting unity among colleagues to counteract the negative impact of harassment.

In essence, both Nordic and international scholarly landscapes have extensively delved into journalists' experiences. However, a conspicuous gap persists in our understanding of managers' and employers' perspectives on online harassment targeting their journalistic staff, especially from a work environment standpoint, although the study by Malcorps et al. (2022) stands as an exception outside the Nordic context. Exploring this under investigated domain promises to introduce novel insights into the established narratives of workplace violence and cyberbullying in occupational studies, providing pivotal insights into the evolving work conditions of journalists in the digital age. Building on this identified research void, this study aims to examine the degree to which Swedish news organizations uphold their obligation to ensure a conducive work environment, particularly addressing the psychosocial challenges arising from journalists' encounters with online harassment. To address this aim, 14 prominent figures, including executives, editors-in-chief, and publishers from both local and national news entities in Sweden, were interviewed. The study pivots on the central research question:

- In the pursuit of a healthy psychosocial work environment, how do Swedish media managers understand and respond to work-related challenges stemming from online harassment targeting their journalists?

Navigating through this question allows the study to fulfill two key objectives: first, to illuminate employers' perceptions of online harassment and second, to elucidate the strategies that news organizations employ to forge a supportive work environment amidst these challenges. Moreover, by leveraging institutional theory (Scott 2008) as an analytical tool, this study adds theoretical depth, contributing to a nuanced understanding of entrenched structures, norms, and practices within organizations. It offers a framework to comprehend how news organizations are influenced by their broader environment when dealing with the challenges posed by online harassment. These insights are not

only salient for the Nordic context but also resonate profoundly within the broader international community.

This paper opens with an introduction to the institutional theory, emphasizing its relevance as an analytical framework for this study. It then details the obligations concerning the work environment, as prescribed by the Work Environment Act, complemented by directives from the Swedish Work Environment Authority, and elucidates the role of news organizations in adhering to these guidelines. A concise review of online harassment and its implications for journalists ensues. The subsequent sections delve into the research design and the methodology employed in the study. In conclusion, the findings are presented, critically analyzed, and discussed.

Institutional perspectives as a model for analysis

To delve deeper into the perceptions and responses of media managers and news organizations to online harassment directed at their journalists, this study employs institutional theory as the primary analytical lens. The significance of the theory in dissecting media organizations' responses to online harassment is multifaceted. On an abstract level, institutional theory elucidates why certain organizational patterns persist, explains why transformative shifts can be elusive in established fields, and outlines the dynamics leading to institutionalization (Scott 2008). Consequently, on a contextualized level, it facilitates an exploration of the foundational reasons shaping media managers' perspectives on online harassment and provides insights into how they navigate the issue from a work environment standpoint. In other words, it serves to elucidate the logic behind news organizations' methodologies in addressing online harassment and managing the inherent challenges associated with top-down cultural change, aspects which have been highlighted as substantial obstacles within journalism (Ekdale et al., 2015; Ryfe 2013, 2019). This theoretical lens, rich in its understanding of organizational behavior and patterns, serves as a vital tool in exploring the depths of media managerial responses to online harassment.

Scott (2008) portrays institutions as robust, complex social structures, permeated with symbolic elements, social engagements, and tangible resources, which influence day-to-day operations. Institutions thereby generate expectations that dictate legitimate actions for organizations (Meyer & Rowan 1977) and shape the logic through which laws and rules are interpreted, as well as how assumed behavioral expectations are perceived as natural and binding (Zucker 1977, 1987). Consequently, they have the power to define what is deemed appropriate or legitimate, determining what qualifies as acceptable behavior (Scott 2008) and rendering certain actions unacceptable or beyond contemplation (DiMaggio & Powell 1991). Institutions, as Scott (2008) describes, encompass regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive facets that, synergized with their affiliated activities and resources, proffer varied legitimacy grounds. Among these, only regulatory elements (in this study's context, criminal law¹ and the Work Environment Act) surface as constraints (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Mahoney & Thelen 2010). However, as underscored by socio-legal scholars (e.g., Drobak 2006; Ellickson 1998; Hydén & Svensson 2008; Suchman & Edelman 1996), given that laws can be ambiguously phrased and might not offer a clear behavioral directive, their coercive nature often diverges from their normative and cognitive counterparts.

Hence, compared to regulation, normative and cognitive facets grant broader interpretative latitude.

Normative structures, enveloped by values and norms, dictate goals, means, and the legitimacy of their pursuit (Scott 2008). Generally, social norms are understood to delineate behavioral boundaries, where adherence or deviation instigates introspective evaluations—fostering a sense of shame for transgressors and esteem for conformists, thereby guiding behavioral tendencies. Notably, some research indicates that flagging harassment to an employer may draw stigmatization, portraying the journalist as emotionally fragile or professionally detrimental (Chen et al. 2018; Kotisova 2019). This dynamic is reinforced by North (2016), who postulates that numerous journalists diminish the severity of harassment, viewing it as an occupational hazard. Such attitudes highlight the conventional behavioral constraints anchored in social norms, demonstrating their pervasive influence even in professional environments. This manifestation of social norms also interacts dynamically with cognitive structures within the institution, influencing not only individual behaviors but also organizational strategies and responses (Scott 2008).

Turning to the cognitive facet of the institutional perspective, Scott (2008, p. 35) emphasizes that entities, like employers, typically adhere to particular behavioral paradigms within an organizational realm. Accordingly, the cognitive component emphasizes the sense-making function: individuals and organizations navigate social routines through deep-seated expectations regarding ‘the way things are done around here’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Scott 2008). Practices are not solely molded by regulative or normative edicts but also by an entity’s cognitive assimilation of their sociocultural milieu and their industry affiliation. Through this lens, legitimacy perceptions and conformity to industry norms by peers play a crucial role in shaping an employer’s perspective and their workplace environment stratagems.

Scott (2008) emphasizes that practices persist and are reinforced in stable social systems because they are taken for granted, normatively endorsed, and backed by authorized powers. In other words, when these three pillars align, their combined force is strong. On the other hand, a misalignment of these components may lead to disarray and struggle, providing opportunities for institutional change (Scott 2008; Strang & Sine 2002).

The Swedish Blueprint: A brief overview of workplace health and systematic responsibility

The psychosocial work environment is a well-recognized and commonly accepted concept in Sweden, especially when considering the causes of issues such as stress and ill health (Abrahamsson & Johansson 2013). According to the Work Environment Act (AML²), ‘work environment responsibility’ entails preventing ill health and accidents at work and striving for a good work environment. As per AML Chapter 2, § 1, a work environment shall be satisfactory, with consideration for the nature of the work and society’s social and technological development. Furthermore, the technology, work organization, and content of the work shall be designed so that the employee is not exposed to physical or mental strain that could lead to ill health or accidents, and the work environment shall be adapted to different physical and mental conditions.

Since the Work Environment Act states that the requirements of the work environment should be adjusted and developed in context, detailed regulations exist on how the systematic work environment approach is to be carried out (AFS³ 2001, 1). The employer shall investigate, implement, and follow up on activities to prevent ill health and accidents, and to attain a satisfactory work environment, including all physical, psychological, and social aspects relevant to the work environment (Arbetsmiljöverket 2016, 10).

The Swedish Work Environment Authority's (AFS 2001, 1) regulations are particularly important for the systematic work environment practice. These regulations apply to all employers and include rules about when the employer should seek the opinion of corporate healthcare or an equivalent expert. In brief, systematic work environment practice implies that all work environment conditions should be investigated and risk-assessed regularly, and if necessary, actions should be taken and subsequently monitored. These described activities form the so-called 'SAM wheel', which illustrates the recurring activities in the practice of the systematic work environment.

In the international arena, Sweden distinguishes itself with a proactive and exemplary stance on workplace well-being. Nevertheless, how these guidelines—and the underlying rationale fueling them—are translated into practice within the journalistic professional milieu merits further exploration.

Online harassment of journalists: A concise review of definitions and health impacts

In alignment with existing research, this study broadly defines online harassment as unwanted and abusive behavior, ranging from mild annoyances to severe abuse and encompassing actions that span from sexualized comments and aggressive, derogatory language to explicit threats (Bowling & Beehr 2006; Lewis et al. 2020; Miller 2021; Patchin & Hinduja 2015). Notably, the term 'abusive' distinguishes genuine harassment from mere workplace inconveniences, providing individuals with substantial latitude in recognizing and categorizing unwanted actions, as perceptions of offense can significantly vary among them (Miller 2021). Moreover, it is noteworthy that an inherent discrepancy exists in this definition compared to much of the workplace harassment literature, which often focuses on internal actors, such as colleagues or superiors (see, for instance, Deery et al. 2011). However, in the context of online harassment of journalists, external actors, primarily the public or individuals not affiliated with the organization, emerge as the main culprits (Miller 2021).

Online harassment notably impacts the mental and professional well-being of journalists. The spike in hostile online interactions has introduced substantial stress into many journalists' daily lives, with numerous studies indicating that such exposure can precipitate mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, while also influencing professional conduct through phenomena like self-censorship (e.g., Binns 2017; Chen et al. 2018; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring 2016; Hess & Waller 2020; Holton et al. 2021; Miller 2021; Obermaier et al. 2018; Scaramuzzino 2020).

With this in mind, it becomes evident that online harassment is more than just a personal affront to journalists; it poses a systemic challenge with profound implications



for the media industry. Recognizing this and acknowledging the pivotal role of news organizations as primary stakeholders in sculpting the narrative around this issue and engineering strategies to mitigate its negative repercussions, there is a palpable necessity to explore the understanding and methodologies of these organizations, especially within the Swedish milieu.

Research design and data analysis

Research participants and the data collection process

A total of 14 interviews were conducted in this study, with respondents drawn from media and journalistic organizations in Sweden. This cohort encompassed executives, editors-in-chief, and publishers actively involved in news production, programs, and editorial decision-making across diverse sectors: radio, television, weekly or monthly periodicals, trade press, local news, digital media, and print. The range in responsibility was evident: some respondents managed large media corporations with multiple outlets, while others oversaw newsrooms in smaller towns. Yet, irrespective of scale, all were accountable for their teams under the Work Environment Act.

In identifying participants, the study collaborated with Utgivarna, a leading Swedish publishing association. Through this partnership, 21 potential participants were identified in line with the study's objectives. Specifically, they were chosen based on their roles as journalistic employers, ensuring a diverse representation across sectors, newsroom sizes, and geographical locations, as mentioned earlier. These individuals received an informational email detailing the research aims, participation criteria, and an invitation to join the study. They were also informed that the data derived from the interviews would be presented with the utmost anonymity possible. From this group, seven declined to participate; some cited time constraints, while others did not respond to the initial invitation or follow-up reminders. Although one-third of the initially approached individuals opted out, there is no evident recruitment bias. Importantly, the reasons given by the seven who declined, as well as their professional roles and responsibilities, reveal no consistent pattern indicating bias. The conducted interviews, which occurred between April and July 2022, typically lasted about an hour. Respondents exhibited a balanced gender representation, with seven males and seven females. Venues for these sessions were equally divided: seven were in-person at the respondent's workplace, and seven were facilitated via Zoom. A professional service diligently transcribed all interviews.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, guided by six overarching themes that also served as the interview guide:

1. Is the democratic role of media under threat?
2. Does the legal system effectively protect the media's democratic role?
3. How is responsibility for a safe and healthy work environment maintained amidst online harassment?
4. How is online harassment discussed in newsrooms?
5. In what ways is self-censorship problematic?
6. What solutions are needed to address these issues?

The questions were shared with respondents in advance via email to familiarize them with the primary discussion topics. This approach intended to facilitate a dynamic dialogue around each theme. Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, the analysis mainly draws from questions 3 to 5, as discussions related to the other questions were beyond the article's scope. Before their interviews, study participants were also informed about the specific definition of online harassment used in this study (refer to the section 'Online Harassment of Journalists: A Concise Review of Definitions and Impacts'). In the context of these pivotal questions, and guided by prior research and the framework of institutional theory, the interviewer introduced detailed follow-up questions during the discussions, enabling respondents to elaborate on their initial answers.

Thematic analysis

Drawing on the work of renowned qualitative researchers, including King (2004) and Braun and Clarke (2006), Nowell et al. (2017) introduced a methodologically rigorous step-by-step process for dependable thematic analysis. This was in response to the scant literature providing practical guidance for conducting trustworthy thematic analysis. Their approach hinges on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of trustworthiness. It integrates the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, aligning with the traditional quantitative assessment standards of validity and reliability. The systematic approach to thematic analysis by Nowell et al. (2017) is frequently cited in scientific literature and has been utilized in a wide array of studies (e.g., Brown et al. 2022; Heckman et al. 2022; Park et al. 2021). This methodology informed the data analysis of this study through a six-phased approach. Notably, this method is not rigidly linear. Instead, it is an iterative and reflective process marked by continuous movement between phases. A detailed breakdown of the step-by-step data analysis process employed in this study follows below.

Step-by-step operationalization

The interview transcripts, considered as raw data, were meticulously archived alongside their corresponding audio files during the initial stage. For an in-depth understanding of the data, these transcripts were rigorously reviewed by the author and two other researchers affiliated with the research project tied to this article. In this phase, the author established a comprehensive coding scheme encompassing primary themes and subthemes drawn from the entirety of the interview content (see Table 1). Notably, this scheme incorporated aspects that were subsequently excluded from the final article, as these aspects fell outside the article's specific focus but remained relevant to the broader research project.

In the third phase, the coded data extracts for every subtheme were evaluated to ascertain the presence of consistent patterns. During the fourth phase, the coding scheme was synthesized into four overarching themes: (1) Prioritizing Physical Safeguarding, (2) Varied Perceptions of Psychosocial Health, (3) Journalistic Stoicism, and (4) Organizational Disconnect from Online Harassment. These themes were deliberately crafted to offer a clear narrative in relation to the research question, grounded in the

Table 1 Initial code scheme

Main theme	Subtheme code	Subtheme description
The Swedish Public Sphere	1a	The confidence crisis in journalism
	1b	The impact of social media on journalism
	1c	Local politics' influence on media reporting
	1d	Challenges of the pressured public sphere
	1e	Recruiting under threat
Two Categories of Pressures	2a	Shifting journalistic narratives through discrediting and subtle harassment
	2b	Aggressive and organized pressures
Work Environment	3a	Measures and guidelines against online harassment
	3b	Focus on Severe Threats and Physical Confrontations
	3c	Lack of Response to Lesser Aggressions
	3d	Culture of Acceptance
	3e	Individual's Responsibility for Support
Self-censorship	4a	Silence Around Self-Censorship
	4b	The Internal Struggle of Self-Censorship
	4c	Lacking Knowledge
The Legal System	5a	Improved Handling of Journalist Vulnerabilities
	5b	Discrepancy in Competence Throughout the Judicial Chain
	5c	The Importance of Active Support and Knowledge
	5d	Legal and Economic Challenges

analytical framework of institutional theory. In essence, this thematic structure aimed to shed light on how institutional practices within news organizations shape their perceptions of and responses to online harassment directed at their journalists. At this stage, the analysis was discussed with the two researchers associated with the overarching research project. Upon comparison with the initial coding scheme (refer to Table 1), aspects especially related to the main themes 'The Swedish Public Sphere' and 'The Legal System' were excluded from the thematic analysis for this study.

In the fifth phase, each of the four themes underwent a detailed analysis, which included highlighting pertinent quotations that fit cohesively within the broader narrative concerning the dataset and the research question. Once the final themes were solidified, the analysis for the study was drafted during the sixth phase.

Results

The results section is structured to offer readers both foundational insights and specific thematic outcomes derived from the interviews, all pertinent to the research question of this study. It starts with background information on preventive measures in Swedish

newsrooms, drawing partially from guidelines that assist news organizations and also from insights provided by the interviews (refer to Subtheme 3a and, to a lesser extent, 5d in Table 1). This serves as a contextual foundation. After establishing this background, the section delves into the study's core findings through a thematic analysis, which presents four separate but interrelated themes (refer to subsection 'Step-by-step operationalization' in the Method section above).

Background: Preventive measures in Swedish newsrooms against online harassment

From the interviews, it became evident that a majority of newsrooms had implemented specific practices and guidelines to combat online harassment and threats. In recent times, entities such as the Swedish Union of Journalism⁴ have taken the lead in drafting guidelines, supporting news organizations in their efforts to address online harassment within their structured work environment practices. The results indicate that respondents and their respective organizations are not only aware of these guidelines but have also incorporated elements of them to varying degrees.

In compliance with ALM and AFS regulations, these guidelines encompass interventions, in-depth analyses, actionable measures, and thorough follow-ups. A pivotal element of these follow-ups involves offering support measures after distressing events, which may entail access to occupational health services or consultations with crisis specialists and psychologists. Interviews revealed that while these measures were available through the organizations' general occupational health initiatives (*företagshälsa*), journalists seldom utilized them in the context of online harassment. Moreover, the guidelines prioritize physical safety measures, highlighting the significance of security personnel, alarm systems, and online safety protocols. These measures, conversely, were more evidently implemented within the organizations.

Accordingly, an emerging trend from the interviews is news organizations' increasing reliance on either external security firms or their in-house security departments to meet these safety guidelines. Beyond providing physical safety, these departments or firms play a crucial role in threat assessment, determining the threat's severity, and suggesting precautionary steps. Larger news organizations typically have internal security departments staffed with jurists who assess incidents legally and liaise with the police as needed. In contrast, smaller newsrooms often determine their security and threat management approaches through discussions between the impacted journalist and the management. Nevertheless, some of these smaller newsrooms, being part of larger media groups, have the advantage of accessing centralized security resources.

Thematic analysis

Emerging from the interviews, the thematic analysis identifies four primary themes that capture the essence of the discussions and directly address the study's research question: In the pursuit of a healthy psychosocial work environment, how do Swedish media managers understand and respond to work-related challenges stemming from online harassment targeting their journalists? Each theme sheds light on different aspects of the



issue, providing insights into the dynamics of online harassment in newsrooms and the associated responses.

Prioritizing physical safeguarding

The respondents believed they had implemented effective strategies against online harassment. They were remarkably consistent in emphasizing guidelines and approaches aimed at ensuring the physical well-being of journalists in this context. For instance, while the interviews focused on online harassment, respondents initially highlighted safety measures related to physical dangers like protests, demonstrations, and the conflict in Ukraine. Additionally, there was a notable focus on preemptive risk assessments rather than post-incident follow-ups, as demonstrated in the following interview extract:

Respondent: [...] When it comes to assessing risks, we have routines for our reporters when they are faced with more difficult assignments of a different nature. It's about...we have...if you want to monitor a riot, for example, you can...how do we work then, in such a situation? Yes, but we have routines for that so that you don't end up in a threatening situation. And it also applies to other types of assignments, abroad or...and other aspects of different assignments. [...] Then it has also been the case that if something comes that is threatening, then we seek help to try to assess it then, is this...How serious is this, is it something...or in practice, is it something we need to take seriously, is there any danger?⁵

The quote above emphasizes the presence of established procedures when journalists come across—in the words of the respondent: ‘difficult assignments’. It is evident that the type of risk associated with ‘danger’, as mentioned by the respondent, is distinct from other risks that the organization may not deem worthy of an organizational response. While the focus on dangerous assignments underscores a priority on immediate physical risks, subtler, less immediate concerns—such as the psychological toll from online harassment—did not seem to receive the same level of attention.

Responding to the health risks associated with subtle forms of online harassment presented a challenge for respondents, whose focus did not naturally gravitate toward these concerns. While acknowledging the potential psychosocial impact on their employees, they primarily delegated responsibility for addressing these risks to in-house security departments or external security firms, especially when incidents were considered potential criminal offenses. The following quote, responding to a question about how employers assess the psychosocial impact of online harassment on their staff, exemplifies this perspective:

Yes, no, it will be a stress charge, of course...Yes, but an exposure that causes you to become stressed. And with that comes other symptoms like tunnel vision and physical nausea and things like that. So that's how you notice it. Then you try...another way to handle the situation is also to...I mean, by bringing in those who are also specialists from other places than the editorial office, such as the security department, you can get a handle on it, how...what is this thing, how serious is it? Are there things that are illegal, or is it other types of threats and hate? And in any case, my experience is that when you do it systematically and look at the situations, then it usually...it also reduces the stress level for the person who is exposed [...]⁶

This quote underscores two key points. First, it reveals that employers employ a subjective rather than a systematic approach to safeguard their employees' psychological well-being. This implies an assumption by employers that they can intuitively detect when a journalist is experiencing distress due to online harassment. Second, the quote suggests that engaging legal-oriented security experts is the primary means to alleviate the burden on the affected individual and instill a sense of security. This approach is most relevant in cases of overtly menacing harassment. These findings also reveal an ambivalent understanding of online harassment's nature: acknowledging its potential for severe health implications while accepting employers' limited capacity to address such issues. To provide a clearer perspective on this, consider the following excerpt, which stems from an extended discussion about the news organization's proactive approach to online harassment:

[...] one thing is what managers can do and supervisors and HR and relief with psychological support and such [can do], which you may need during a period. But it can almost be even better to hear, "yes, it's hell for three or four days, it usually subsides." It can also be comforting to hear just...like, "keep your head down a little bit, and this will blow over because it will move on to the next question or the next person." And it's damn unfunny, but it doesn't last forever. Because I can be afraid that...I know that employees who have been, in periods, heavily exposed have almost got...you could...now I'm not a doctor, but PTSD-like symptoms. That when you come across a similar subject again, your heart starts to race, and the stress kicks in...you are reminded of what happened. And I want our employees to be able to do it again and again and again.⁷

Viewed through the lens of institutional theory (Scott 2008), this indicates an ingrained institutional perspective on journalists' well-being. At first glance, the respondent almost appears to lack respect for the journalist's well-being. However, understanding institutional logic helps contextualize this. From this perspective, the quote highlights an institutional conflict: downplaying the severity by suggesting affected individuals need not overly worry while also expressing concerns about retaining employees who might depart due to online harassment and ensuing psychosocial health issues. This duality indicates institutions' pressures and constraints, where adherence to established norms may clash with emerging challenges and realities. This is likely consistent with historical industry practices for addressing workplace issues predating journalists' concerns about online harassment. The following interview excerpt further exemplifies this attitude:

[...] it is extremely important that you feel that you have support and that these are questions we share with each other. For us who work at such a large company, that we have a security department that can also evaluate different things. I mean, we're journalists. I'm not as security trained as someone who just has it [security] on their desk. It is also an important aspect for evaluating "what do we need to care about and what do we not?" If you don't have that, I think it can be a lot to carry by yourself.⁸

This suggests that employers' perceptions are influenced by the norms and values shaping their understanding of a healthy work environment. The findings also illuminate how respondents perceive, conceptualize, and respond to harassment in a way that focuses on physical security and overshadows the need for emotional support and subtler forms of abuse.



Varied perceptions of psychosocial health

In alignment with the institutional tension described in the first theme of managing online harassment, many respondents found addressing the issue consistently challenging. Some journalists reacted strongly to isolated and relatively minor incidents. In contrast, others remained seemingly unaffected by persistent and severe episodes. This divergence in reactions underscored the complex reality managers face when navigating these issues. One respondent articulated this as follows:

And now I'm going to say something that you probably only can say as an employer too, it's also very, very difficult to relate to threats and hatred as an employer because it's received from...the same email is received in entirely different ways depending on who gets it. And some employees can almost get upset if they understand that you want to start an apparatus around that, while others, on the contrary, get upset because you don't take certain things so seriously. So that, above all, hate here is very, very subjective, how badly you take it. So, I think that is a very difficult question. It is not possible to have one and the same solution. It is not possible to say, "this is exactly how we handle threats and hatred," because then everyone risks becoming a little dissatisfied.⁹

The quote reveals a significant nuance: both managers and journalists operate within a shared institutional framework. This suggests a blurred distinction between management and journalists and implies that their common institutional grounding might lead managers to align with deeply ingrained journalistic ideals, values, beliefs, and practices. Consequently, subtler forms of abusive behavior, such as much of online harassment, may not align perfectly with these long-standing paradigms. While this collective mindset could be valuable in preserving journalistic integrity, it might inadvertently minimize the nuanced challenges posed by the digital age, resulting in an absence of systematic protocols to confront them. This illustrates a paradox in maintaining a healthy work environment: while physical confrontations are rare, both mild and overt online harassment, common occurrences, can persistently impact journalists' well-being detrimentally, as one respondent noted:

[...] I think those situations are probably a bit tougher anyway when you face it out in the field. There is still some kind of filter in the email, I think that kind of threat is probably more...grind down probably more, more mentally taxing, like some low-frequency type of hate that comes just when you write about certain areas, and so on.¹⁰

What is clear from the quote above is that the institutionalized understanding of the work environment contributes to a lack of awareness, or passivity, regarding the psychological distress brought about by online harassment. In other words, even though respondents recognize that online harassment has a 'grinding effect' and is 'more mentally taxing' than what journalists might face in physical environments, this form of work environment hazard seems to be less prioritized. This, in turn, places the burden of responsibility on individual journalists to inform their employers about potential work-related concerns if they find themselves in need of support.

Journalistic stoicism

Several respondents indicated that although occupational health care services are available to employees in the event of emotional distress, they are rarely utilized. Likewise, when asked whether they believed their employees would approach them or other superiors if they experienced discomfort from exposure to online harassment, the typical response was that they thought they would, but they were uncertain. Despite asserting that they communicated unequivocally that any expression of hatred or threats is unacceptable, some of the respondents reasoned that journalists' tendency not to reach out for help and to show themselves as vulnerable could be attributed to a journalistic culture, as demonstrated by the following quote:

There is also a culture, so to speak, at least there has been a journalistic culture that 'you have to put up with a bit of that'. Yes, it's part of the job in some way that angry people call [...] But we have really tried to emphasize that there is zero tolerance and that you should contact your immediate superior and perhaps make the assessment together with your immediate superior linked to what measures you should also take. But there is probably...culturally, there is maybe a little bit like where you think that 'that wasn't that bad, I guess', or 'that probably comes with the job'.¹¹

Reiterating prior discussions, the stance of news organizations towards the work environment is shaped by a prevailing normative belief entrenched in journalistic culture, which tacitly normalizes enduring online harassment as 'part of the job'. This posture could reflect an intrinsic value system that perceives those negatively impacted by such behavior as unfit for the profession. Consequently, a distinct tension arises between the long-standing cultural norms and modern endeavors to champion occupational well-being in today's digital age. Even with managerial initiatives to establish a zero-tolerance policy against online harassment, journalists' adherence to persistent, albeit detrimental, norms cultivate a hesitancy to utilize support structures like occupational health services or to disclose issues to superiors. This is further illustrated in the following interview extract:

- Interviewer: [...] what kind of support can you offer journalists who actually come and say they are negatively affected by this?
- Respondent: We can offer lots of support. We have occupational health care, and we have psychologists and there is...there is the whole battery. But it is quite rare. And it's not because we're stingy, it's probably because they rarely come to us that way. They talk to each other a lot; they talk to their bosses and so on. There is a lot of support.
- Interviewer: But if they talk to their bosses, how does it not reach you?
- Respondent: Yes, yes. But then maybe that's enough. It's such a...on a certain level, this is such an obvious part of our everyday life, so that it's more when it gets worse that it then escalates, or if there are extra sensitive individuals that you have to keep an extra eye on.
- Interviewer: How do you deal with extra sensitive individuals?
- Respondent: It's quite difficult, actually. It's tough to be a journalist at all if you're very sensitive, because it's also...interviewees always get angry, and you're



exposed to quite a lot. An angry person in power can be experienced as much more troublesome than twenty-eight Russian trolls. So, there is... there, these questions correlate a bit with other parts of our work environment. It's hard to be a journalist if you're too sensitive, and it's not just about threats and hatred. That's probably my...well, that's my conclusion anyway.¹²

Here, an underlying assumption persists: that online harassment poses problems only for 'extra sensitive individuals', given its depiction as 'such an obvious part of our everyday life'. Within this context, certain normative and cultural structures may inadvertently normalize harassment, shaping a narrative about how a 'successful' journalist—contrasted with a sensitive one—should navigate within such an institutionalized framework. Hence, even as journalists recognize the emotional strain resulting from exposure to online harassment, and despite explicit zero-tolerance stances toward such behaviors, the deeply ingrained norms and values of their profession may inhibit them from seeking requisite assistance. This complex dynamic—an internalized acceptance of online harassment juxtaposed with its tangible psychosocial impact—is elucidated in the following quote:

[...] we discovered a while ago that it was someone who had received a lot of hate after an article, a fairly new temp, and she hadn't said anything. And then this came to light six months later, so we have started to draw up a policy around this, which we will inform every new employee about.¹³

Within news organizations, Everbach (2022) asserts that deep-seated institutional norms have created an environment characterized by insufficient understanding and an inadequate systematic approach to online harassment. The quote illuminates this institutional mindset's stronghold. It hints at the learning curve that younger journalists face, navigating and assimilating into these established institutional norms. Everbach (2022) further argues that such journalistic norms could significantly threaten the profession's future growth. This sentiment resonated with numerous respondents who expressed concerns about recruitment challenges in the industry (refer to subtheme code 1e in Table 1). While this study does not explore this emerging issue in depth, it undeniably underscores the imperative for future research to address these shifting institutional dynamics.

Organizational disconnect from online harassment

Following the discussion above, a prevailing belief emerged that online harassment did not significantly impact core journalistic practices at the organizational level. In other words, online harassment was not viewed as a barrier that threatened the larger journalistic landscape. As such, respondents did not underscore the organizational significance of ensuring journalists' psychosocial well-being; rather, they downplayed it as a personal issue. It is worth noting, however, that several respondents recognized that online harassment leads to journalists self-censoring their work. Yet, they regarded this consequence as a minor issue for the field of journalism. As one respondent articulated:

I mean that we are not influenced as a media company in such a way that we avoid topics or angles, or publications because there is hatred and threats in society, in that way I do not think we are influenced. But it can affect individuals, and because they... We must deal with it for their sake, and so that the company is not affected, we also need to deal with it.¹⁴

Similar to the quote above, other respondents conveyed that online harassment—encompassing both milder forms of abusive online behavior and direct threats—is employed as a sustained tactic to suppress diverse perspectives in journalism. It was further observed that this strategy often proves successful. One respondent, a public figure with a dual role as editor-in-chief and writer for a trade press journal, echoed the detrimental effects of online harassment on their work. Additionally, they highlighted the elusive nature of online harassment’s impact on their professional output:

Then it can also be the case that...sometimes there is a kind of unconsciousness...so, a little of what I talked about, I don’t let myself...I write on whatever topics I want. And no one is going to affect that for me; no matter how much hate there is. But, of course, the tiredness means that I sometimes, as I mentioned, sometimes choose “no, but now I can’t bear to enter into that debate”, or “now I’m...” And that’s...self-censorship, but it is in any case a way of being able to choose one’s battles.¹⁵

Similar to the respondent cited above, numerous participants in this study recounted experiences with online harassment in their journalistic pursuits, be it present or past. Yet, in contrast to the quote above, other respondents professed a notable resilience to such exposure, arguing that they remained largely unscathed. From an institutional perspective, this can further be seen as a manifestation of deeply entrenched norms and practices within the journalistic profession. The resilience professed by respondents in recognizing online harassment as an organizational matter is likely a reflection of these institutionalized beliefs, which emphasize stoicism and endurance in the face of adversity. As demonstrated in this thematic analysis, such norms and beliefs unintentionally hinder the development of a systematic approach to address the psychosocial aspects of online harassment, especially when the abuse is not overtly threatening.

Discussion

Against the nuanced landscape of media management and online harassment, this research brings forward several poignant insights. The primary revelations indicate that the perceptions and strategies adopted by media managers to combat the multi-dimensional challenges of online harassment are deeply intertwined with normative and cultural systems within journalistic institutions. Through an institutional lens (Scott 2008), in navigating through the regulative expectations of their roles, these media managers carve out preferred strategies and legitimate methodologies to counteract online harassment, all while anchoring their actions in traditional journalistic values, norms, and beliefs.

The resilience in adhering to systematic coping mechanisms in the face of online harassment is attributed to intrinsic institutional persistence, which deters deviation from established norms (Scott 2008). This tendency to uphold traditional practices, even

when they might be suboptimal in addressing emergent challenges like online harassment, anchors organizations in established patterns (Meyer & Rowan 1977). While often overlooking the necessity of systematically addressing intangible aspects like mental well-being, the prevalent discourse among media managers primarily leans toward implementing tangible protective measures against direct physical threats to journalists. This prevalent bias toward visible threats surfaces from the subjective interpretations of media managers, who perceive less overt forms of abuse as part of the job in journalism.

The neglect of the psychological impacts of online harassment can potentially be traced back to entrenched cognitive structures within the journalistic field (Scott 2008). Where these cognitive structures persist, the prevalence of mental health stigmatization within the industry becomes potent (Kotisova 2019), often blinding organizations to the subtler yet pervasive impacts of online harassment. Despite the notable insights provided by previous research highlighting journalists' perspectives on organizational deficiencies in addressing online harassment (Celuch et al. 2023; Eberspacher 2019; Everbach 2022; Hagen 2015; Hiltunen & Suuronen 2022; Malcorps et al. 2022; Kantola & Harju 2023; Miller 2021; Nelson 2022), this study extends this understanding by shedding light on the intertwined institutional dynamics between media managers and journalists. That is to say, it provides a fresh perspective that illuminates a critical subtlety previously overlooked in much of the existing research: both managers and journalists operate within the same institutional framework. In other words, managers are not external to journalists' institutional environment.

The overt focus on physical safety may well emanate from normative pressures that historically prioritized the physical well-being of journalists operating in hazardous zones (Chen et al. 2018). Normative expectations within the field, which downplay the severity and impact of psychological harm, inadvertently create an environment where milder forms of harassment are overlooked or minimized (North 2016). Accordingly, while regulations might impose obligations on organizations to safeguard employee wellbeing, the divergence between regulative mandates and normative practices within journalistic fields can lead to a skewed prioritization, inadvertently marginalizing certain aspects of employee welfare. This aligns with socio-legal scholars' contentions regarding the often-ambiguous impact of regulations on altering institutional behaviors (e.g., Suchman & Edelman 1996; Drobak 2006; Ellickson 1998; Hydén & Svensson 2008).

In threading through this intricate tapestry of institutional dynamics, media managers with substantial field experience emerge as entities embedded within a culture where their roles as supportive employers are intricately intertwined with deeply rooted ideals, values, beliefs, and practices of journalism. A deeper understanding of these institutional dynamics is crucial for materializing transformative shifts. Managers must not only engage in self-reflection regarding their stance on harassment but also critically evaluate the institutionalized beliefs and practices that serve as obstacles to proactively addressing these issues, thereby assisting journalists in coping with potential health-related concerns. Given the ever-evolving and demanding dynamics of contemporary newsroom operations, undertaking such institutional introspection and breaking away from engrained patterns is no doubt a formidable challenge (see also: Ekdale et al. 2015; Ryfe 2013, 2019). Therefore, the significance of this study lies not just in identifying barriers to change but in shedding light on the underlying institutional structures and practices perpetuating them.

In other words, the study underscores that a growing divergence is driving a misalignment within the institutional pillars (Scott 2008; Strang & Sine 2002): on one side, journalistic organizations are maintaining persistent normative practices, while on the other side, they are facing increasing pressures and threats from the evolving digital landscape. Therefore, it is paramount that future strategies aimed at mitigating the impacts of online harassment within journalism not only target individualistic protective measures but also engage with these deep-seated institutional structures, providing a pathway toward more effective and sustainable solutions.

As the discussion concludes, it is essential to reflect upon the study's methodological nuances and constraints. The research provides a comprehensive view of the Swedish media landscape. However, the study's geographical concentration might constrain its broader international applicability despite the global significance of the subject. Likewise, a more expansive comparative approach across various media sectors could offer enriched insights. It is also worth noting that, despite the sole authorship of the interviews, the combined efforts of several researchers reviewing the transcripts have considerably bolstered the study's credibility and interpretative validity.

Conclusion

This research probed the extent to which Swedish news organizations uphold their obligation to ensure a conducive work environment, with a special emphasis on the psychosocial challenges arising from journalists' encounters with online harassment, by examining the following research question: In the pursuit of a healthy psychosocial work environment, how do Swedish media managers understand and respond to work-related challenges stemming from online harassment targeting their journalists?

In responding to this question, the study found that media managers, deeply rooted in long-standing journalistic norms and culture, predominantly prioritize protection against physical threats. This often results in the inadvertent sidelining of subtler forms of online harassment, which can be understood as cognitive assimilation informed by their sociocultural environment and industry affiliation (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Scott 2008). Put simply, these forms of harassment are generally considered a normal part of the job and, thus, are not typically recognized and addressed as work environment hazards. Consequently, this mindset obstructs the systematic addressing of nuanced online harassment, frequently relegating such incidents to the realm of individual concerns instead of acknowledging them as organizational issues.

Accordingly, the findings underscore the urgent need for news organizations to dismantle stigmas related to vulnerabilities arising from online harassment, while concurrently spotlighting the complex dynamics of dismantling deeply rooted paradigms that pose barriers to such practices. By integrating an institutional perspective (Scott 2008), this research enhances the theoretical depth concerning how media managers perceive and manage online harassment in journalism—a facet previously unexplored in the Nordic context. This emphasis on internal industry challenges as pivotal in confronting external pressures casts light on the sturdy institutional frameworks that not only shape responses but also solidify barriers to substantial changes in online harassment management. Addressing these challenges necessitates a strategic shift, one that aims not merely



to adjust existing strategies but to catalyze a foundational shift in the institutional narratives guiding responses to online harassment in journalism.

While rooted in journalism, the findings raise broader questions about the institutional culture's comparability across professions grappling with online harassment. Investigating whether barriers to addressing harassment are unique to journalism or echoed in other democracy-critical roles, such as politicians and academics, is vital to maintaining a democracy free from professional intimidation and self-censorship. Such exploration would deepen our understanding of online harassment dynamics across professions and aid in developing systematic approaches to mitigate its organizational and societal harms. Beyond its relevance to specific academic and professional fields, this research underscores the societal imperative to protect democratic institutions and professionals from online harassment's pernicious effects.

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Notes

¹ In this context, criminal law is relevant since online harassment deemed illegal should be reported to the legal authorities.

² AML is an abbreviation of *Arbetsmiljölagen*, the English equivalent of which is ‘The Work Environment Act’. The English term ‘The Work Environment Act’ will be used in the remaining sections of this article.

³ AFS is a shortening for the regulations of the Swedish Work Environment Authority. In Swedish: *Arbetsmiljöverkets föreskrifter*.

⁴ Refer to the guidelines and recommendations on the Swedish Journalism Union’s official website: <https://www.sjf.se/rad-stod/arbetsmiljo/sakerhet-hot-och-hat>. Additionally, more information can be found on the non-profit work environment organization Prevent’s dedicated page: <https://www.prevent.se/bransch/kultur-och-media/hantera-hat-och-hot-pa-redaktionen/>.

⁵ Excerpt from interview number 1.

⁶ Excerpt from interview number 1.

⁷ Excerpt from interview number 5.

⁸ Excerpt from interview number 8.

⁹ Excerpt from interview number 6.

¹⁰ Excerpt from interview number 9.

¹¹ Excerpt from interview number 9.

¹² Excerpt from interview number 7.

¹³ Excerpt from interview number 12.

¹⁴ Excerpt from interview number 1.

¹⁵ Excerpt from interview number 14.