


Chapter 15

Confronting Freedom to Inform With Freedom of Expression: The Case of Online Attacks of Journalists in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Globally, there is an increase in online attacks on journalists with gender dimensions to these attacks. Also, it is established that digital innovations have augmented free expression and the augmentation allows means for online attacks. Though evidence submits that studies on the problem of online attacks on journalists abound, there is dearth of such studies in Ghana and this chapter attempts to fill this gap. Using the feminist theory, this chapter explores the types and sources of online attacks on male and female journalists in Ghana and investigates whether an increase in free expression is a contributing factor to the problem. To achieve this aim, the study employs qualitative methods of in-depth interviews and document reviews and offers a thematic analysis of the qualitative data to understand the lived experiences of Ghanaian journalists. Findings revealed that journalists frequently experience psychological and sexist online attacks when perpetrators express their views on unfavourable coverage from the media.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the means for free expression have increased due to technological innovations (Cannataci et al, 2016; UNESCO, 2018). Citizen journalism and social media have altered the traditional roles of journalists and the dynamics of journalism practice (Chen & Pain, 2017). The changes have enhanced journalism practice in numerous ways, especially news sourcing and audience participation (UNESCO, 2018). Journalists use personal social media accounts to reach out to their sources and to attract followers to their content (Chen & Pain, 2017). Also, social media accounts of news organisations and journalists

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enable citizens to report and share critical views on issues of interest (Ferrier, 2018; Franks, 2013) due to the anonymity new media technology affords its users. Therefore, augmentation of free expression is realised due to digital innovations (UNESCO, 2018).

Unfortunately, the augmentation of free expression and anonymity from new media technologies also afford users the power and means for easy online attacks against journalists with impunity (Ferrier, 2018). Thus, the impact of technological innovations on journalism demands the use of digital tools and social media to source, create and distribute media content (Jamil, 2020b; Koirala, 2020; Jamil & Appiah-Adeji, 2019). The increased use of social media in journalism comes with threats and risks (Franks, 2013) from numerous sources daily. Thus, media technologies, anonymity from the technologies, citizen journalism, and augmentation of free expression have armed perpetrators with simple, less expensive and faster means to attack journalists online. A smart device with an internet connection is enough for perpetrators to launch such attacks. Perpetrators wrongly use their right to free expression to attack journalists when coverage of issues incur their displeasure (Jamil, 2019a, 2019b). Therefore, it is argued that digitization of the journalism practice has heightened journalists' vulnerability to online attacks (Antonijevic, 2016). In this regard, UNESCO (2018, p. 150) posits:

The advent of the digital sphere has brought unprecedented opportunities for freedom of expression and the practice of journalism more broadly. Yet, the digital sphere is evolving and surveillance, data storage capabilities and digital attack technologies are becoming more sophisticated, less expensive and more pervasive, making journalists increasingly vulnerable to digital attacks from both state and non-state actors.

Different social media strategies are used by perpetrators to attack journalists as well as discredit their stories (Ferrier, 2018) even in countries like Ghana where journalists are considered to be safe due to elaborate statutory provisions on media freedom (Owusu, 2012). Journalists are experiencing online threats and risks of different shapes and forms because of their profession (Adams, 2018). Perpetrators of these attacks often aim at discrediting journalists and/or damaging their reputations (Kiorala, 2020). Such experiences have short- and long-term effects on journalists: to silence them and to cause them to quit journalism (UNESCO, 2018). Perpetrators use online channels and the media itself to amplify messages that aim at attacking the credibility of or silencing journalists from performing their roles in democracies (Ferrier (2018). As a result, “online attacks against journalists have become more sophisticated in nature, more insidious in their damage to the news enterprise and more dangerous for journalists” (Antonijevic, 2016, p. 11).

Evidence submits that female journalists are disproportionately attacked online (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2016) and “in the most disturbing and dangerous of way” (Mitjatovic, 2016, p 1) when compared to their male counterparts. An affirmation by Antonijevic (2016) posits that “violence against women in all its forms is the most prevalent human rights violation in the world and unfortunately it is not decreasing, but growing” (p.9). Routines of female journalists have been persistently characterised by gender-based threats (Kiorla, 2020; Jamil, 2018, 2017a, 2017b; 2016; 2015; 2014). For instance, “female journalists and bloggers throughout the globe are being inundated with threats of murder, rape, physical violence and graphic imagery via email, commenting sections and across all social media platforms” (Mijatovic, 2016, p.1). In agreement, Ferrier (2018) claims that “many of the threats women journalists receive on Twitter, Facebook and online backchannels are sexist in nature, designed to intimidate or shame the journalist” and questions the “intellectual rigour and professional

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