# BYTE BACK

A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO COMBAT CYBER HARASSMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

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## 1.  THE RISE OF ONLINE ABUSE

Freedom of expression is a vital human right that we fight for every day in our media. Yet for women journalists in South Asia who dare to speak out and express their opinions, trolling and abuse are almost a given.

In 2015, during the UN campaign to eliminate violence against women, the IFJ's Gender Council highlighted the 'damaging and rapidly increasing incidents of cyber-bullying and threats to women in the media and the ways women journalists are targeted – often for simply being women in the profession'. So too, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) report 'New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists' released in February 2016, said that women journalists, bloggers and other media actors are 'disproportionally experiencing gender related threats, harassment and intimidation on the internet which has a direct impact on their safety and future online activities'.

Back in 2013, a study of verbal and online abuse in India called *"Don't Let It Stand"* found that women journalists had recognised the predominant mindset of trolls and online harassers. In return for expressing themselves online, they faced threats of rape and murder, personal and professional attacks, stalking and surveillance. Yet they had also developed responses and were exposing the ideological biases, misogyny and hatred that permeated their attackers' messages.

However, too often, the 'trolled' find themselves silenced by self-censorship or driven out of debate. Senior media veterans have been known to quit Twitter after a spate of virulent abuse. Others have preferred to temporarily opt out of social media interaction when personal attacks, rape or death threats are made to them or their families, or when personal details or locations have been leaked online.

This is not a future for a robust media environment online. When the voices of women journalists go missing from legitimate public spaces online, we all lose.

This is why the IFJ and its affiliates are taking action to **Byte Back** against trolling and harassment. This is a guide to provide support and advice based on shared experience of others worldwide and includes handy links to other research and IFJ resources.

With courage, wit and sheer determination, we've seen many journalists demonstrate how to take on trolls, call them out, respond to patently false information and posts, factual distortions, propaganda and misogyny. They have flagged trouble-makers who, through incessant trolling, attempt to deliberately misdirect online conversations and derail healthy debate. It is true there are many ways to take this fight back.

Importantly, this guide is also a call to solidarity for all media workers, to join together in this fight for freedom of expression and safety online.



"Even though I control the privacy of my Facebook account as much as I can, **memes about me have been made and circulated on the internet** using my personal information gleaned from Facebook. The fear in Pakistan always is that the digital hate could quickly become very real."

AMBER SHAMSI, BBC URDU

# 2. UNDERSTANDING TROLLING

The online world is likened to a street where you can befriend someone who you share no mutual friends with or know nothing about. Generally, people accept or turn down requests 'friend requests' online depending on mutual friends or accounts they follow.

But sometimes, we may venture into uncharted territory - strange streets where we may not know anyone. That's part of the adventure of exploring new worlds. Yet, that comes with its own challenges and the rise of online harassment or trolling is now a critical issue for the media.

Some argue that the term 'troll' is an inaccurate description of all online abusers and that trolling is a legitimate form of response to call out opinions or views one disagrees with. This guide uses the common usage of the term and distinguishes trolls from criminal harassers, stalkers and those who indulge in 'doxing' – or sharing of personal details online.

Trolls actively **seek out their targets**. Therefore, by nature of the profession, any journalist can be fair game.

While they may seem to work alone or post messages as single individuals, trolls usually operate in **packs or online mobs** by following one another and tipping off others about potential targets for attack.

It is important to **spot** trolls early and determine whether to 'friend' them (on a social networking site like Facebook) or block them (from Twitter if they follow you). Some journalists believe, and rightly so, that every person who reads and responds to their articles, messages and posts, is a valued reader/member of an audience.

Hence, in order to foster diverse public debate, online



All journalists must fight to occupy the digital space as a right and help build solidarity on the issue.

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"End digital harassment against women journalists; with encouragement, let's stand together"

**NIRANJANI ROLAND**
FREE MEDIA MOVEMENT, SRI LANKA

**#DONTTROLL**
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"Online harassment of female journalists **not only puts the journalist at risk but is also a blow to freedom of expression**. This is cybercrime and must not be ignored!"

SARAH BATOOL HAIDER, PAKISTAN/DENMARK

discussions with unknown individuals are essential. However, when some individuals disrupt healthy discussion by trolling or other forms of online harassment, no productive debate can ensue and it is important to stop the harassers in their tracks.

While many trolls do use technology like **bots and algorithms** to set up automated trolling, vested interest groups regularly create multiple accounts and rope in **"paid trolls"** to harass, abuse and threaten their targets.

It is no surprise that most trolls operate under the cloak of **anonymity** and upload incomplete or misleading profiles of themselves; with hazy locations and insufficient markers of their identities. Anonymity is not, in itself, a bad thing. Often, people resort to anonymous posting as a security measure, speaking out even when it is dangerous to disclose their identity.

Unfortunately anonymity also allows snowball effects to occur with relative ease. Too often a mob mentality governs the online space: once one abusive comment is posted, others join in. The abuse can grow and speedily move across other digital platforms – from Twitter, to Facebook, to blogposts and beyond. To the target, it would seem like the abuser is all over: the office, the home and the street.

Recent research suggests suggests that far from trolling being confined to a few sociopathic fringe elements, anyone can become a troll or engage in trolling behaviour given the right mix of circumstances. This includes seeing abusive comments on a site to which they are active on.

However, Professor Danielle Keats Citron argues in *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, that abusive behaviour cannot be described as normal nor inevitable and that there are practical and lawful ways to prevent and punish online harassment. Where it does operate, she describes it is a cultural problem that collectively needs to be tackled using both technological and social means.

## 3. BYTE BACK AND BUILD SUPPORT

Social media companies, activist groups and lawmakers are all working to develop strategies to handle online abuse and help people feel safer online. Women journalists have used a range of strategies to push back, some of which have been documented by the pioneering Internet Democracy Project research study, *Don't Let It Stand!* and increasingly in other journalism initiatives.

### WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE BEING HARASSED ONLINE

**IGNORE:** Ignore the abuse and the abusers

**FILTER:** Set your social media filters to block/moderate key words

**BLOCK:** Mute, block or 'unfriend' an abusive online presence

**REPORT:** Report abuse to moderators of chats or social media companies. Most social media sites offer users a way to report harassment. You can also file a complaint with the police under cyber crime laws.

➜ **File a complaint** with the company or website where the abuse took place. If it is Facebook or Twitter or any other social media networking or content sharing site (Instagram, YouTube,), check for their contact details and write to them with specific details. It is useful to cite the terms given by these sites to pinpoint the exact transgression you are seeking action against. Many sites respond to harassment that does not fit their community standards or violates any of it.

➜ **Try to take a lawyer and/or a friend when you go to the police station** since police can be notoriously indifferent casual or plain ignorant though most countries have a cyber crime cell. Check the police website for details and write to them.

**NAME AND SHAME:** Re-tweeting an abuser's comments or writing a post to point out the abuse can be an effective strategy. Women journalists have increasingly found support from others and in some instances abusers have backed down, deleted offending tweets and even apologised. Some targets have even found the mums and dads of trolls to call them out on abuse.

**SHOUT IT OUT:** Don't keep quiet! Tell others about the harassment. Get friends, colleagues and the media company you work for involved in the reporting of abuse or in taking joint action. Press the media company to intervene and delete abusive posts lodge a complaint or support your complaint. Your online presence is an important voice for your media house; make them accountable for the harassment you are receiving because of your work.

**SAVE AND DOCUMENT ABUSE:** Whether one takes the legal or the non-legal route, it is important to keep a few things in mind:

➜ **Collect evidence** of the abusive posts and tweets. Harassers can try to wipe out their data or remove posts. It is possible to retrieve data but this requires specialists and it may need a court order, so police will resist or put off requests to collect cyber evidence.

## REPORTING ABUSE

**Facebook** Facebook has a report abuse button and a help page; **Twitter** has recently revised its abuse reporting mechanism to make it more robust. There is still some way to go before social media platforms are as responsive as they should be.

**FACEBOOK:**
Facebook has a long list of community standards but sometimes baulks at taking action against even blatant violations, citing protection of free speech. In one instance, when Kerala-based writers and bloggers Inji Pennu and Preetha G reported abuse on Facebook, their accounts were taken down.

Facebook now has new standards on reporting nudity and hate speech, an auto-reported feature. It has also begun using Artificial Intelligence to deal with abuse, taking the task of identifying content that violates its community standards away from human moderators.

**INSTAGRAM**
In August 2016, the Facebook owned photo and video-sharing network Instagram announced new tools to filter keywords and automatically block trolls. The custom keyword filter allows users to ensure that comments containing a default list of words they select will automatically be hidden.

**TWITTER:**
In February 2017, Twitter announced new changes to its features to report abuse. It can now stop people who have been permanently suspended from the site from creating new accounts. It has introduced a 'safe search' feature which removes tweets containing sensitive content and tweets from muted or blocked accounts and it will collapse potentially abusive or low-quality tweets, ensuring that the most relevant and high-quality replies are pushed forward.

➜ **Take screenshots** of the offending messages and copy the URL of the account. Download any information you can, including the profile.

## APPS AND ABUSE REPORTING SITES:

A number of sites and projects are focusing on the reporting of abuse. Apps are continually being devised to help women report the harassment as well as upload brief narratives of the abuse experienced. In March 2017, the Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development announced plans to launch an online App **'I am Trolled'** for women to report when they are threatened with physical violence on social media.

**Trollbusters** has an '*Online pest control for women writers*' and provides just-in-time rescue services to support women journalists, bloggers and publishers who are targets of cyber harassment'. Trollbusters uses a virtual S.O.S. team to send positive memes, endorsements and testimonials into online feeds at the point of attack.

**Everyday sexism** is a site that documents in detail, the sexism experienced by women, online and offline, in the hope that speaking about it will break the silence around harassment. The Everyday Sexism Project is an online catalogue of instances of sexism, major or minor, experienced on a day-to-day basis. It invites people (pseudonyms are allowed) to share their stories.

The gaming community, which has had long experience with trolling and abuse, has found constructive ways to deal with trolling. Check out the tips given by Video game designer Mike Drach, who wrote and produced *ForumWarz*, a computer game that was about arguing on message boards.

Another initiative is Pakistan's cyber harassment helpline which was launched in 2016 by the not-for-profit Digital Rights Foundation. Anyone facing online harassment can call in on 0800-39393 to talk in a "free, safe and confidential" environment. The service aims to provide legal advice, digital security support, psychological counselling and a referral system to victims.

### BANGLADESHI BLOGGER REFUSES TO BACK DOWN



Bangladeshi blogger **Shammi Haque** (pictured below), has experienced so many threats for her work that she is now in exile in Germany. In 2016, after organising a Valentine's Day rally against religious extremism, a political leader organised a fund-raiser to raise collateral to fly someone to Germany to rape her.

"They are collecting money to fund **a ticket to Germany so that someone can be sent to rape me!** That is shocking! But, I am not going to give up on my writings. I feel safe in Germany and will continue writing from here."

**BYTEBACK**

# 4. FIGHTING HARASSMENT COLLECTIVELY

## FIGHTING THE TROLLS TOGETHER

Whatever personal strategy works for you day to day, there is no doubt that what really works is when journalists come together to support one another and campaign against abuse.

When cyber bullies and trolls realise their 'victim' is not alone and is instead fighting back, they can back off. As journalists we need to continue to develop strategies to protect ourselves and our colleagues online by standing together and having a stronger presence online. This is a space we need to preserve and protect.

Join online and offline 'Zero-Tolerance Campaigns' like the IFJ's Byte Back campaign that focus and educate on the issue. Emphasize the need for journalists to occupy digital space as a right and help build solidarity on the issue, while also directing and supporting those targeted towards concrete help.

## MEDIA RESPONSIBILITIES TO ONLINE ABUSE

Understanding the nature of trolling behaviours and online abuse, gives media houses opportunity to actively intervene and ensure that abusive and inappropriate comments are speedily filtered or blocked. By doing so, they are removing the opportunity for other trolls to feed off or be inspired by an attack.

Push for a policy in your media organisation - see the **IFJ Draft Social Media Policy for Media Organisations.**

Media houses and publishers of online content are increasingly using tools to better combat trolls by filtering hate speech, derogatory and misogynist comments. One such mechanism is Vuukle, which has tied up with Google to help combat online trolls and hate mongers.

➜ **Suggestions for hashtags:**
  #DontTroll
  #DefendMyVoiceOnline

### TURNING ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

**Khadija Ismayilova** from Azerbaijan was publically shamed and harassed online after cameras were secretly installed in her home and intimate encounters with her boyfriend filmed. Blackmailers warned the videos would be posted online if she did not stop her reporting on corruption which was aimed at exposing the highest levels of government. When she refused, the images were broadcast on the internet. Despite facing a prison sentence on what Amnesty International termed "fabricated charges" she vowed to fight on.

"I won't break under a 15 or even a 25-year sentence… **I am going to have an opportunity to expose [abuses in] the penitentiary services**. I am one of those people who knows how to turn a problem into an opportunity."

"Journalists all around the world need to join together in this fight for freedom of expression and safety online."

**PHILIPPE LERUTH**
PRESIDENT - INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS

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**IFJ**

**BYTEBACK CAMPAIGN**
FIGHTING ONLINE HARASSMENT

Use the IFJ campaign materials like posters and postcards, slogans and videos to spread awareness and raise the issue of accountability.

#DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE
#DONTTROLL
https://samsn.ifj.org/ifj-byteback-campaign/

Women journalists are fighting threats, intimidation and violence online using strategies ranging from open discussion and humour to legal remedy and police action.

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# #DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE

## THE GENDER PARADIGM

*The Dark Side of the Guardian* research project examined 70 million comments left on *The Guardian* website between 2006 and 2016.

➜ Of the 10 most abused writers, eight were women and two were black men

➜ In all, 1.4 million comments (or 2%) were blocked by Guardian moderators

➜ Stories by women journalists had more blocked (ie abusive or disruptive) comments

*The 2016 study Violence Online In India: Cybercrimes Against Women & Minorities on Social Media* (Feminism in India and Freedom House) found:

➜ 58% of respondents in India had experienced online harassment

➜ 36% took no action at all, while 28% reduced their presence online

➜ Countermeasures reported included blocking abusive accounts using features offered by social media websites (77 percent) and reporting behaviour to the relevant platform (58 percent)

## WHEN YOU'RE THE TARGET

The dark side of the internet is extremely dangerous for women facing harassment, stalking and threats of rape or death. Some have had violations of their privacy and details of intimate moments with former lovers shared on social media in cases of 'revenge porn'. Others have given up their lives in despair due to extreme harassment and hounding.

'Don't feed the trolls' is common advice. Ignoring attacks is believed to effectively deny trolls publicity oxygen. Yet, sometimes they don't give up. A concerted attack can end up seriously destabilising a person's life, derailing day-to-day activities, forcing them to give up, suspend or deactivate their online accounts. Such targeting cuts off women's access to the online world and must be confronted and strongly resisted.

### REJECTING MIND CONTROL IN INDIA

Indian journalist **Barkha Dutt** had tweeted a quote by the Indian Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) about how he spoke to his Pakistani counterpart on 'Surgical Strikes'. She found that it was circulated on WhatsApp as her own comment, along with death threats and questions about her patriotism. In her response on Facebook she said:

"What you see below is a concerted campaign to target and induce fear– and perhaps much worse – given the physical threats I have received in the last 24 hours. And **I am damned if I will let anyone edit my mind or control it in anyway**. So these ba@@ards who spread criminal lies can just go stew in their own venom! I don't and won't give a shit."

# GLOSSARY
## FORMS OF ONLINE ABUSE

**Attacks:** Unrelated to content, and directed at women such as "You are so unintelligent", "Call yourself a journalist?" or "Do you get paid for writing this?"

**Author abuse:** Demeaning and insulting speech targeted at the writer of the article or another comment.

**Cyber bullying:** Repeated online harassment, threats and intimidation.

**Cyber stalking:** Stalking using electronic means.

**Death threats:** Online rape threats or threats to maim or disfigure.

**Dismissive trolling:** Mocking or trivialising comments such as "Calm down, dear" or "go home to your children".

**Doxing:** Disclosure of private or identifying information addresses or phone numbers online aimed to harass and intimidate.

**Hate speech:** Not aimed at a particular person, but the community to which a person belongs; can take the form of sexism, casteism, xenophobia, racism and homophobia.

**Impersonation:** Taking an online presence in someone else's name, by creating a social media account, particularly with celebrity names.

**Online abuse:** Any type of abuse that happens on the internet, including social networks and online gaming; can also include mobile phones.



"We, male and female journalists, are here to create a gender equal society where everyone can be themselves. Together we can make it."
**THAHA MUZAMMIL**
TREASURER - FREE MEDIA MOVEMENT, SRI LANKA
#DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE
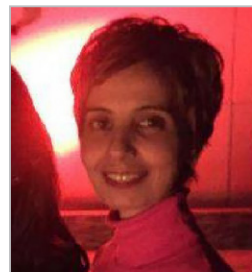@IFJASIAPACIFIC
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**#DONTTROLL**

**Sly tweeting:** Indirect abuse of the target without mention of the name but with clear identifying references.

**SWATing:** False reporting to the police or emergency services

**Trolling:** Sowing discord and hate online by posting hostile, inflammatory, offensive, or off-topic comments in an online community such as a news group, chat room, or social media platform like Facebook or Twitter.

**Visual-based abuse** includes:

➜ Manipulating images from Facebook photos or profile pictures;

➜ Defacing photographs of women to intimidate, humiliate and embarrass or create 'hate pages' on Facebook;

➜ 'Revenge porn' or former boyfriends/husbands uploading intimate photos/videos with malicious intent to harass and blackmail;

➜ Body shaming, misogynist and racist comments related to appearance.



"Social media platforms also have a responsibility to be more responsive and put greater control in the hands of their users."
**ZARIFA GHAFARI**
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF APAW, AFGHANISTAN
#DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE
@IFJASIAPACIFIC
BYTEBACK
**#DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE**



"Violence is not only physical- online harassment is a form of violence too. We need to work out a strategy against online harassment, whereby women should feel empowered in virtual world- not powerless"
**SABIN AGHA**
BROADCAST JOURNALIST & DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCER, PAKISTAN
#DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE
@IFJASIAPACIFIC
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**#DEFENDMYVOICEONLINE**

"I've seen **blackmail, photoshopped pictures, hacking of personal accounts and rape threats**. Women activists and feminists are trolled and targeted as 'unethical western agents'."

NIGHAT DAD, DIGITAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST, PAKISTAN