Are media organisations adequately protecting LGBTQ journalists from harassment and abuse?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through a survey of 40 LGBTQ journalists working in the United Kingdom and one-to-one interviews with six media workers, this report explores the abuse and harassment faced by LGBTQ journalists and if the level of support offered by media organisations is sufficient to protect LGBTQ staff from abuse.

The report finds high levels of abuse facing LGBTQ journalists, a lack of support for victims of harassment, specific abuse targeting sexual orientation and gender identity being commonplace and social media being the prime vector for abusive messaging.

- 87% of survey respondents do not believe enough is being done to tackle the problem of harassment and abuse against LGBTQ journalists

- 78% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that it is becoming more dangerous to be an LGBTQ journalist

- 78% of respondents believe that media organisations in the United Kingdom are not adequately protecting LGBTQ journalists from harassment and abuse

- 58% of respondents say their employer does not recognise specific risks faced by LGBTQ employees

- 86% of respondents say they experience abuse and harassment

- 62% of respondents did not file a complaint after experiencing abuse

Key recommendations based on the research findings:

1. Expand journalist training to specifically include threats faced by LGBTQ journalists around homophobic abuse

2. Training for media executives on the impacts of abuse against journalists and best practices for advising staff on combating abuse, especially in the digital space

3. Provide therapy/counselling services to both staff journalists and freelancers that face abuse due to their reporting

4. Ensure that incidents of abuse and harassment are recorded and tracked

5. Introduce policies that encourage journalists to report all forms of abuse easily and anonymously

6. Reassess abuse policies to make sure specific risks faced by LGBTQ employees are recognised

7. Ensure that initiatives move beyond achieving representation and expand to foster an environment where LGBTQ journalists feel truly included

INTRODUCTION

Media organisations in the United Kingdom have a complex historical relationship with the LGBTQ community. Newspapers with millions of readers, including The Sun, The Mail on Sunday and the now-defunct News of the World, would regularly publish articles that used slurs such as 'poofters', 'benders' and 'lezzies' (Strudwick, 2019). For example, an article titled "Abortion hope after 'gay genes'," published in 1993 by the Daily Mail, is emblematic of tabloid media coverage of gay people at the time (Ball, 2019). Even the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, called gay men 'tank-topped bum boys' in a 1998 Telegraph column, demonstrating the widespread tolerance of discriminatory language.

Coverage of LGBTQ stories and issues has improved in recent decades, reflecting the legal and social advancements made by gay men, lesbians and, to a lesser extent, trans people. However, there is evidence that news as a category is still found to contain a high level of potentially discriminatory output, compared to other mediums. Furthermore, a survey of 569 people on LGBT+ representation in the media in 2021 saw 73% of respondents who identified as members of the LGBT+ community say they have witnessed discrimination due to negative and unrealistic media portrayals. In addition, a majority of respondents state that news is the platform that shares the most negative and unrealistic portrayals of the LGBT+ community (INvolve, 2021).

Abuse towards all journalists has increased in recent years with this growth being attributed to rapidly increasing social media usage and the ability for social media platforms to offer users the ability to instantly communicate with any other users (Miller, 2021). The United Kingdom government has also recognised this increase and the risks associated with being a journalist and created the first ever national action plan in March 2021, after reports to the government from journalists who have suffered "abuse and attacks while going about their work, including being punched, threatened with knives, forcibly detained and subjected to rape and death threats," (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021).

Recent years have also seen more coverage given to trans issues, in part reflecting growing public interest in proposed UK Government policies around the medical treatments received by trans children and the now-abandoned reforms to the Gender Recognition Act. Research commissioned by IPSO (2020) identified a 414% increase in transgender-related stories in sample publications that were tracked from 2009 to 2019. A heated debate around trans issues is ongoing within UK media.

A heated debate around trans issues is ongoing within UK media. In an open letter to the Guardian, two trans journalists, Freddy McConnell and Vic Parsons, said they would "no longer write for The Guardian until it changes its trans-hostile and exclusionary stance," (Hunte, 2022).

In the context of high-levels of abuse and harassment against journalists across the world, as well as threats to LGBTQ people, assessing the unique threats facing LGBTQ journalists is essential, if the areas where these journalists are most at risk are to be found. At present, little academic literature, surveys or statistics exist on the online and physical harassment and threats that LGBTQ journalists receive. The vast majority of studies on this topic focus on the experience of American LGBTQ journalists (Waisbord, 2020a; Bell and Keer, 2021), with only a handful of studies having been conducted on the specific challenges facing LGBTQ journalists in the UK (Magrath, 2019; NUJ, 2021).

However, the experiences of LGBTQ journalists around harassment and abuse haven't been researched enough in the UK to be able to provide a comprehensive insight into the challenges, issues and threats these journalists face.

This study aims to fill this gap and seeks to understand the level of abuse against LGBTQ journalists in the UK, as well as the impacts such harassment causes on both a personal and professional level. This study was funded by a Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity Industry Fellowship grant. The author of this report, Finbarr Toesland, is a multi-award winning journalist who focuses on human rights stories and underreported issues for international publications.

This paper will aim to comprehend the complex and intersecting ways LGBTQ journalists are targeted as a direct result of their sexual orientation or gender identity and examine the support available to them from media organisations.

Through a survey and follow-on interviews of LGBTQ journalists, this project seeks to understand their experiences of abuse and harassment, how this has impacted their career choices/progression and the level of support provided by their media employer. The survey is believed to be the first national survey of LGBTQ journalists working in the United Kingdom on the topic of harassment and abuse.

Industry review

Estimates on the number of LGBTQ people living in the United Kingdom vary. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports that 3.1% of British people aged over 16 identified themselves as either lesbian, gay or bisexual in 2020, an increase from 2.7% a year earlier (Office for National Statistics, 2022). The same report found that 93.7% of the adult population defined themselves as heterosexual, with responses of "don't know" and "other" contributing to the decline of the straight adult population since 2015. In August 2022, a YouGov survey asked Britons to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 6, where 0 is exclusively heterosexual and 6 is exclusively homosexual. Only 66% of British adults ranked themselves as 0, meaning completely heterosexual, with more than one-in-three (34%) selecting 1 to 6, no sexuality or don't know. Among 18-24 year olds, just 36% say they are completely heterosexual (YouGov, 2022).

With research from Wagaman (2016) showing that identity is difficult to define consistently, for the purposes of this report, the term LGBTQ will be broadly defined as anyone who identifies as being LGBTQ. The acronym LGBTQ represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. Academics such as Brant (2016) have reported the use of similar, but not identical, acronyms including GLBTQ and LGBTQIA+. Due to the LGBTQ acronym being the most common, it will be used in this report. The primary reason for this decision is to ensure the experiences of people from a wide range of identities that fall under the LGBTQ umbrella are considered in this report.

By some accounts, gay, lesbian and trans people are comparatively well-represented at media organisations in the UK. In 2018, the then BBC Director of Diversity, Tunde Ogungbesan, disclosed that 417 staff members were transgender, or almost two per cent. "That is very, very high," he is reported to have said (Withers, 2018). A Freedom of Information request found that 10.6% of BBC staff identify as being either gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, with this figure increasing to 11.5% across BBC leadership teams (The Christian Institute, 2017).

However, while representation is welcomed, it is not enough without true inclusion. Inclusion in this context would be the creation of policies and guidelines that ensure LGBTQ journalists are given institutional support when they face challenges or harassment as a direct result of their sexuality or gender identity during journalistic activities. The limited research on LGBTQ journalists in the UK show they face additional challenges and discrimination as a direct result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, research by the National Union of Journalists last year found that close to a third (29%) of LGBT journalists have reported experiencing bullying, harassment, ill-treatment or

discrimination at work, as a result of their sexuality or gender identity (NUJ, 2021). More than one in ten (13%) of respondents to the confidential survey said the person they were interviewing had behaved in a discriminatory or bullying way.

Abuse facing LGBTQ journalists can originate from a range of vectors including colleagues, audiences, anonymous individuals and high-profile social media personalities. All journalists can face harassment and abuse in the course of their jobs, with the work produced by journalists clearly not being immune to critique and disagreement. The impacts of harassment against journalists have been well-studied (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016). In addition, what one journalist considers to be abuse may not rise to the level of abuse in the opinion of another journalist. However, when such discourse targets specific and legally protected characteristics of a journalist, such as sexuality or race, that are irrelevant to the piece of journalism being discussed, it is possible to characterise this as abusive, and LGBTQ journalists deal with a disproportionately high level of attacks.

UNESCO's The Chilling report found that a higher percentage of lesbian and bisexual women journalists face online attacks compared to heterosexual women. While 72% of heterosexual women journalists said they had been targeted by online attacks, 88% of lesbian and 85% of bisexual women journalists had faced online attacks (UNESCO, 2021). The anonymous nature of many social media platforms emboldens a segment of users to send abusive messages and targeted harassment (Mondal, Silva and Benevenuto, 2017). In a global context, LGBTQ journalists, those suspected to be LGBTQ or those reporting on issues relating to sexual minorities face intense harassment, violence and even murder (Iyamah, 2018). Waisbord (2020a) identified female, minority reporters and journalists who cover issues related to right-wing identity anchors as also becoming central targets to trolling, especially on social media platforms. From taking time off work to recover from the strain of online violence to stopping reporting on LGBTQ issues to even leaving the industry; harassment is a powerful tool to silence LGBTQ journalists and reportage.

Three separate forms of harassment were defined by Holton et al (2021) after interviewing news workers: "acute harassment such as generalized verbal abuse, chronic harassment occurring over time and often from the same social media users and escalatory harassment that is more personalized and directly threatening," (p.1). A broad spectrum of actions can fall under the scope of abuse, including in-person harassment and online threats (Lewis, Zamith and Coddington, 2020). Journalists themselves recognise the impact that the advent of social media platforms has had on their profession and craft, with many pointing out Twitter as an important part of their reporting resources (Hermida, 2013).

A challenge presents itself when terms such as hate speech, abuse and harassment are discussed. Many often conflicting definitions exist for these terms but as Ștefăniță and Buf (2021) assert, "hate speech, in general, and offensive material online, in particular, are not easy to define and may include a wide spectre of expression" (p.47). In a journalistic context, Parfitt (2022) offers the definition of harassment online as "the sending of content designed to alarm or distress the recipient e.g material that is offensive, abusive, carries the threat of violence or may be racist, homophobic or sexually explicit," (p.69-70). This definition will be used for the purposes of this report.

It is important to place the harassment and abuse faced by journalists in the United Kingdom in a global context. Data from the Committee to Protect Journalists identifies four journalists and media workers who were killed in the UK from 1992 to 2022, compared to 151 journalists and media workers killed over the same time period in Mexico. There has been one journalist killed in the United Kingdom in the last 20 years, Lyra McKee in Northern Ireland (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022). No journalists or media workers are currently in prison in the UK for their reporting. Yet Reporters Without Borders does acknowledge the threats to the safety of journalists in Northern Ireland to be a concern (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022).

Journalist Ben Hunte, became the first LGBTI correspondent for the BBC in 2018. In 2020, Hunte said he and his family received "racist and homophobic abuse" that he reported to the police (Hunte, 2020). The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) released a statement supporting Hunte's work, with Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, saying: "No journalist simply doing their job should be subjected to such harassment and hate-filled comments. It is right that the police are now involved. The BBC must do all it can to protect and support its staff subjected to online abuse…," (NUJ, 2020).

The media industry and its workers are not a monolith. For example, a gay male sports journalist working in Sheffield may not experience the same challenges as a trans person working as a breaking news reporter in London. As Magrath (2019) finds in the sports journalism field, "men are "out" to their colleagues and report generally positive experiences…their sexuality has little bearing on their career and progressing in the sports media workplace," (p.255).

If left unchecked, hate speech and abuse against LGBTQ journalists has the potential to create a chilling effect where journalists are either uncomfortable or afraid to report on vital issues of importance to LGBTQ people.

Methodology and survey design

In the first stage of the research, LGBTQ journalists were invited to complete an online survey that asked respondents about their experiences with abuse, the level of support media organisations provide LGBTQ employees and their views on the wider media ecosystem, related to LGBTQ issues.

Ethical considerations were placed at the forefront of the survey design process. Physical risks were not a consideration, due to the research being carried out remotely. However, the sensitive nature of discussing physical violence or abuse online was acknowledged. In an attempt to mitigate the chances of stress and discomfort to participants, if at anytime they felt unable or unwilling to continue their involvement in the research, it was possible to leave the survey or interview. In addition, any survey question may be skipped for whatever reason. However, due to the nature of the research and questions asked of respondents, there is likely to be some level of distress caused by, for example, exploring past experiences of harassment. All respondents have been sensitively informed of these risks and have provided consent. A number of LGBTQ specific helplines and resources were provided before respondents started the survey or began an interview.

Survey data was collected anonymously, unless participants choose to provide an email address, and were distributed to a wide range of freelance and in-house journalists who identify as LGBTQ. In recognition of the demanding nature of jobs in the media industry, and to ensure that as many people as possible were able to participate in the survey, the survey was open to responses for 28 days.

Researchers such as Faugier and Sargeant (1997) identified the challenges of surveying hard to reach populations, concluding that "the more sensitive or threatening the phenomenon under study, the greater potential for respondents to hide their involvement and the more difficult the sampling is likely to be" (p.791).

Due to the sensitive topics discussed and the potential for professional backlash, the snowball sampling method was used to help ensure the highest number of LGBTQ journalists were aware of the research and to gather participants who meet the research criteria. As Browne (2005) added, snowball sampling is often used for populations that are hidden "either due to low numbers of potential participants or the sensitivity of the topic," (p.47). Browne also points to the extensive use of snowball sampling in relation to research on sexualities. Of course, there are only a limited number of LGBTQ journalists working in the United Kingdom. Asking other LGBTQ journalists to signpost this survey and research to their colleagues was vital in ensuring the widespread dissemination of the survey.

As a gay journalist who has been writing for international publications on LGBTQ issues for a decade, I have first-hand insight into the challenges LGBTQ journalists face throughout the course of their work. This experience enabled me to identify a diverse range of LGBTQ journalists and ensure the most relevant questions were asked in the survey and in the following interviews. While I have built up a large number of contacts of fellow journalists during my experience as a journalist working on LGBTQ topics, it was important for as wide a range of LGBTQ journalists as possible to engage with this research and share their experiences, as well as ensure that any selection blindspots I may have were mitigated. For that reason, an effort was made to encourage LGBTQ journalists outside of my personal network to fill-in the survey.

In order to achieve this goal, the link to complete the survey was distributed in a number of ways. As this research is interested in seeking the views of LGBTQ journalists based in the United Kingdom, only professional social media groups that included substantial members of this group were contacted during this process, including the LGBTQ+ Journalism Network, Freelancing for Journalists and Sports Media LGBT+. Individual emails and messages on social media platforms were sent to a number of high-profile LGBTQ journalists that worked in-house at media organisations in senior roles to improve the chances that they would see the call out for survey respondents. The survey was also shared on my personal social media profiles.

The survey included questions that asked for both closed and opened-ended responses, so that qualitative and quantitative data could be collected. Around 40 questions were asked in the survey, with two questions asking for long-answer text and four asking for short-text answers; the remaining questions accepted responses in tick-box form.

Towards the end of the survey, journalists were given the opportunity to give examples of the kind of abuse they had personally received and add any comments they wanted to share about their experience of harassment or abuse, in text form. Providing this space for open-ended responses was important to make sure that respondents were able to share their thoughts on topics that the survey did not ask and establish more context to their previous tick-box answers. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide their email if they were happy to be contacted again for a more in-depth one-to-one interview at a later date. The next stage of the research involved undertaking one-to-one interviews with several of the survey respondents who had given consent to contact them. Almost half of the survey respondents indicated they would be happy to take part in a follow-up telephone interview to share their experiences in more depth.

To achieve a diversity of thought and opinion in the one-to-one interviews, a selection was made based on factors including industry experiences, job role, age, gender, journalism speciality and area of media they work within. All interviews were carried out remotely to ensure that these interviews were as easy to attend as possible for the journalists and they could choose a space they felt most comfortable. Participant information sheets were sent over email to all one-to-one interview participants, with consent forms being signed by all participants before the interview.

The survey was supplemented by a number of in-depth interviews with practising LGBTQ journalists to gain deeper insight into the specific challenges they face, the support they currently receive and what additional resources they would benefit from receiving.

Some potential participants may have had concerns around getting involved in the research as they are not open about their sexuality or gender identity at work. For this reason, responses are anonymous and, unless their express consent is given in writing, data has been anonymised in the final report.

The research therefore followed a mixed methods approach, allowing for the numerical measurements from the survey to be addressed alongside an in-depth exploration of one-to-one interviews.

Once collection was completed, the responses were categorised and assessed to give a clear view of the most pressing challenges facing LGBTQ journalists and how they can be best supported by their media organisations. It is hoped that the results of this report will be considered by media executives, leaders and managers as they build out the resources and support that they make available to their journalists.

Participants

A total of 40 LGBTQ journalists completed the survey. 40% had between 1 to 3 years of experience working in the media industry, 34% had between 4 to 6 years experience with 10% having between 7 and 10 years and 16% having more than 10 years experience. A broad range of occupations are represented in the survey with freelance journalists, assistant editors, digital reporters, community news reporters and news correspondents all sharing their experiences. Half were employed in staff positions, with 32% being freelance and the remainder being on fixed term contracts, student journalists or interns. When it comes to the type of journalism produced, 41% focused on news, 25% on features, 11% on opinion and 8% on broadcast. Sports journalism, SEO and social journalists also participated.

In terms of the area of media that respondents primarily worked within, 29% work in local news, 21% in national news, 13% in international news, with others working within politics, sports, technology, science culture and LGBTQ media. More than half (55%) work in digital media, 13% in newspapers, 13% in television, with the rest working in radio, magazines, or wire services. The age of respondents naturally reflected the age distribution of LGBTQ people in the United Kingdom, with 12 respondents aged between 18 and 25 and 21 respondents being aged between 26 and 35. The remaining respondents were over 35 years old.

In terms of race, there were a number of non-white respondents but unfortunately no Black respondents. An effort was made to reach out to UK Black LGBTQ journalists but none completed the survey. While it is unfortunate that no Black respondents participated in the research it reflects the reality that just 0.2% of UK journalists are Black (Arboine, 2020). Six survey respondents were selected from the survey to participate in one-to-one interviews to gain a more detailed understanding of their experiences. Between them, the six interviewees have experience in commissioning, reporting, digital, production and many other journalistic skills, as well as identifying as lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual and queer.

To ensure both survey respondents and interviewees felt comfortable in offering their unfiltered and critical views, without the fear of any repercussions from employers, all comments have been anonymised. Due to the relative uniqueness of the job roles and an overabundance of caution, it is not possible to include details of each of the interviewees beyond rather generic attributes. Any personally identifiable quotes have either been excluded or edited to remove only references that would compromise their identity. There were well-founded concerns that in the small world of journalism, even job titles would be enough to work out who a respondent is. For example, there are only a handful of LGBTQ publications and the combination of job title and how many years of experience they have would make the interviewee identifiable.

As not all survey questions were compulsory, due to the need to give respondents the ability to not answer sensitive questions, some questions do not have answers from all 40 participants. Survey comments and one-to-one interview responses will be used throughout the results and will be identified as such.

Results and analysis

Based on the 40 survey responses and six one-to-one interviews from LGBTQ journalists actively working in the UK media environment at a range of publications, the results from this research finds widespread levels of abuse and harassment targeting LGBTQ journalists in the course of their core job activities. The report identifies both subtle and easily observable weak points in the provision of support from media organisations.

The resulting impact of both intermittent and consistent abuse can lead to a number of negative outcomes that, if left unchecked, have the potential to create a less diverse and representative media ecosystem where LGBTQ topics are underreported.

One of the questions asked survey respondents directly: 'Do you believe that media organisations in the United Kingdom are adequately protecting LGBTQ journalists from harassment and abuse?'. Just two (5%) responses agreed with this proposition, with seven (19%) having no opinion. A resounding 28 respondents (76%) either disagreed (62%) or strongly disagreed (14%) that media organisations in the UK are adequately protecting LGBTQ journalists from harassment and abuse.

Just under half of respondents (49%) say they would not know who to reach out to at their work for support if they became the focus of a targeted harassment campaign on social media. The survey finds that a majority (58%) of survey respondents say their employer does not recognise specific risks faced by LGBTQ employees.

The comments and individual interviews reflect a toxic combination of regular abuse, particularly on social media, and a lack of confidence in organisational support. The research analysis will be broken down into four overarching themes. Firstly, the forms of harassment and abuse and how they are deployed against LGBTQ journalists will be explored. Secondly, the personal impact of abuse and harassment on LGBTQ journalists will be analysed. Thirdly, the role of social media platforms as vectors of abuse will be investigated. Lastly, the role of media organisations in protecting LGBTQ journalists from abuse and harassment is explored.

Forms of harassment and abuse

Participants report facing a wide range of different forms of abuse and harassment throughout the course of their work. From abusive emails with death threats and homophobic abuse from a religious street preacher while on a press trip to Twitter trolling and abusive messages under stories; an extremely wide range of abusive activities have been reported in this research. Options were provided to respondents and they were also able to add their own types of abuse experiences that were not included in the selection, which several chose to provide. By far the most prevalent form of abuse was trolling on social media. Establishing a single, catch-all definition of trolling is challenging, due to the range of actions that fall under this term. The definition offered by Waisbord (2020b) that trolling encompasses "a range of malicious behaviours that aim to cause trouble, fear, and concern through aggressive and threatening language," (p.985) will be used for the purposes of this report.

82% of respondents said they had faced trolling, with homophobic harassment ranking second with 56% of respondents dealing with this abuse. In-person abuse may not be as widespread as online abuse, possibly due to the anonymity and relative ease that abusive comments can be shared digitally; but there are still examples of in-person threats. One respondent says they were "approached by a lady in a supermarket who criticised my journalism and called into question my ability."

Abuse isn't just isolated to professional criticism about the content of published articles but extends to everything from serious unfounded allegations about being a "predator" to negative comments about physical features. One respondent says they have faced everything from "attacks on my work, being called a 'groomer', being told that my work is 'predatory'/I am a predator, transphobia about people I interview, horrific comments about my personal appearance/physical characteristics/my identity as an LGBTQ+ person."

Specific abuse targeted at trans people was mentioned by participants throughout this research. Almost one in four (24%) respondents say they have faced transphobic harassment and 6% of respondents say they have been deadnamed. Deadnaming is where a trans person is called by the name they used before they transitioned, typically their birth name. In all one-to-one interviews and several of the written responses provided by survey respondents, the media coverage and experiences of trans journalists, and the wider trans community, was mentioned.

A trans journalist who participated in a one-to-one interview reports facing transphobic abuse online and believes reporting on trans topics is becoming more polarised, with different media outlets often presenting trans issues in dramatically different ways. "It sometimes feels like two different articles are living in two different worlds. You've got the BBC reporting on a person being raped by a transwoman. But then you've got LGBTQ outlets reporting on really positive things [about the trans community]." Due to an uncertain reporting environment, the reporter sometimes feels the need to hide their trans identity when first meeting people and getting to know them. "It's kind of a shame, because it's who I am. But I wouldn't feel comfortable sort of outing myself to a lot of people immediately, because I do worry there would be some kind of negative backlash, whether that's really subtle, or whether it's refusing an interview - it's difficult to judge people." This reporter also feels a lot of anxiety around how interviewees perceive them, especially around if the interviewee can see the reporter is trans, and how that perception affects their contributions.

In the context of comments left in the survey and one-to-one interviews, this trepidation appears well founded. For LGBTQ journalists, engaging in the current media coverage and debate related to trans issues, especially on topics related to self-ID policies, has proven to lead to high levels of abuse.

Only one survey participant provided a different view on the cause of harassment, saying 75% of the abuse they have personally received is from "trans "women"" (quotation signs included by the respondent) activists and is so horrendous, I don't want to repeat it. The remainder is from lesbians and is sexual and/or intimidation/bullying." This respondent also adds they are "LGB, not LGBTQ+, stop grouping us together." At least in the scope of this research, this perspective is a minority view, as all other responses relating to trans issues identify trans people as victims of abuse, rather than perpetrators. However, this viewpoint does confirm the polarising response to trans issues.

One survey respondent wrote: "Voicing support for trans inclusion almost inevitably leads to harassment and abuse on Twitter. I recently left a big media organisation in order to go freelance and I'm now much more cautious about how I use social media." Not only does writing articles about trans issues cause a backlash but for journalists that publicly identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, sources can also make assumptions when they know you are LGBTQ and/cover LGBTQ stories, making gaining trust difficult. A survey respondent said: "I've had people refuse to speak to me because I am a member of the LGBTQ community and my integrity as a journalist questioned. Being a journalist who covers LGBTQ matters also propels personal traits into the public domain in a way that other news briefs do not, increasing the risk of vulnerability and exposure."

A consistent theme touched on by several interview participants was the openness to genuine critique and critical responses to their work. While the context and personal feelings of each journalist plays a role in the extent to which a comment is viewed as abusive or not, many messages and comments can be unproblematically identified as abusive. For example, if the comments or messages call the journalist a slur, send serious unfounded accusations or pick out a protected characteristic, such as sexual orientation or gender identity, as the basis for the negative comment, then there is little grey area about assigning these comments as abusive.

Personal impact

Survey participants were asked "As a direct result of the harassment and abuse you have faced, which of the following have you experienced? Please select all that apply." Four in five respondents said they had experienced stress, with almost three in four respondents (74%) reporting anxiety. Despite the large number of participants facing mental health challenges due to the harassment and abuse they received at work, only 51% of respondents say their employer provides access to free therapy or counselling services, leaving close to half of these LGBTQ journalists without access to vital free therapy or counselling services. "I've heard this around the office, and other journalists have said it to me, and it's always a joke "you've succeeded, and you've reached a milestone as a journalist when you receive a death threat," said one interviewee.

The general understanding from respondents is that abuse and harassment are unfortunate, but expected, parts of the job description of journalists. With this being said, the impact from ever-present targeted abuse and homophobic language should not be understated. For one LGBTQ journalist, the regular harassment in the newsroom's inbox from trolls was part of why they left their job. "As a local journalist living there, I was becoming worried about my physical safety and my mental health in general started to suffer from the hateful comments," they add.

Even when LGBTQ journalists do face abuse and harassment in their line of work, responses to this research show that the severity and impact can be underplayed, as there is a prevailing consensus in the industry that abuse comes with the job. Even one journalist who had received death threats didn't believe this abuse to be "serious" as it was sent from an anonymous social media account online. Another respondent said "My only experiences have thankfully been trolling comments on stories about LGBTQ+ people," illustrating the view that trolling comments are relatively OK, as other journalists can face more intense threats. Due to the routinely abusive nature of comments under articles related to LGBTQ issues, a number of journalists say they have just stopped reading all comments.

Death threats, homophobic messages and in-person abuse do not exist in a vacuum, with these challenges adding to a heavy workload that LGBTQ journalists need to contend with. "In mainstream media being a queer journalist has become harder, not only because the public have such hatred of whole groups in our community," a survey respondent added. "There is a level of exhaustion when having to cover stories which are more based around our trauma than our joy," explained a survey participant. There are also cases where trolling has moved beyond abusive comments online and developed into efforts to get journalists fired, with one survey respondent saying they received "severe trolling and then emailing my work to try and get me sacked."

Social media platforms

No matter what form of media participants work within, the vast majority (90%) believe a presence on social media platforms, such as Twitter, is important for journalists. However, 88% of respondents say they have received harassment or abuse through Twitter, with 33% receiving abuse through Facebook and 24% receiving abuse through Instagram. Just one respondent said they had not received abuse or harassment through any social media platforms.

One reporter interviewed said when she joined her newspaper, an editor told her: "When people start if they don't have a Twitter account, you have to make one and it's connected to your profile [on the website of the publication]." Maintaining a presence on social media platforms, in particular Twitter, is clearly important for journalists to build relationships with sources, discover the latest news directly from potential sources, and share their articles. "It's tricky because social media is so important for finding stories. On Twitter or Facebook, I'll see something and screenshot it, and then pitch it in the next morning's meeting. Obviously, if I didn't have social media, I wouldn't see those stories and engage - you kind of have to be present in those conversations," adds an interviewee.

There can often be no indication of what articles trolls or harassers may decide to focus on and flood with negative comments. Pile-ons are one source of abuse that can appear virtually out of nowhere, with one interviewee writing a run-of-the-mill article about an LGBTQ event that led to over 65 negative and abusive comments, which is far more than the single digit comments that this type of article receives. "There was a bit of a pile on from quite a few people who started twisting what I was saying. I ended up blocking most of them. I don't know if that got shared in the wrong Reddit thread or something like that."

During a one-to-one interview, an editor says that abuse and harassment have gotten worse since he entered the industry because of social media. "Social media has made the accessibility of journalists far, far easier. So you are more in the frontline than ever before," he said. While he believes the transparency over the process of journalism is valuable, as it is giving readers the ability to share their view directly with journalists, social media has been abused by some elements of society. "It's when that view tips over into abuse, that's when things get dangerous. And because of, again, Twitter, it's made things much, much worse."

Perhaps as a result of the threats coming from the digital space and social media, 73% of respondents say they have used safety measures to ensure digital security. The apparent randomness and difficulty in working out exactly where the trolling is coming from can add to the feeling of helplessness. "I had people get in touch with me and ask them to remove the comments, or shut the comments thread down. And they also got in touch with the editor in chief of the paper about it saying can you remove it because there is a lot of homophobia," adds a respondent. "I think if you're a public figure, whether you're a politician, an activist, or a journalist, you're gonna get comments that you can't really control. It's a very, very sad state of affairs, that it is going to happen. I think you have to develop a thick skin. But, my God, I really wish we didn't have to."

Organisational responsibility

Targeted abuse and harassment clearly have a pronounced impact on the victims of these activities. However, the wider media ecosystem in the United Kingdom is also having a negative impact on the production of journalism on LGBTQ issues and is contributing to the creation of a less diverse workforce, according to survey respondents.

Participants were asked to read a list of the potential results that high levels of harassment and abuse can have on journalism as an industry and select all that apply. The single largest impact identified by 92% of respondents was harassers will feel emboldened, with 76% saying that high levels of abuse will cause LGBTQ journalists to leave the industry and reduce diversity at media organisations. A toxic cycle can be established if people who send abusive messages feel emboldened, as it can result in more negative comments and threats being sent to journalists, causing them more harm. At a time when countless major media organisations are introducing and expanding programmes to address diversity deficits, the findings that unchecked abuse can directly cause LGBTQ journalists to leave the industry is highly concerning. Media organisations have a clear responsibility to do everything within their power to protect the physical and mental safety of the journalists they employ and not unnecessarily place staff in dangerous environments. Yet, the results of this research strongly indicate LGBTQ journalists do not believe enough is being done to reach this outcome.

An editor with extensive journalism experience says that while media firms do have a huge responsibility, they aren't doing enough. "I think they just think it comes with the territory and because of that, you just have to get on with it." According to this interviewee, if a journalist is going to be sent to a war zone, they will have to attend various hostile environment training courses. But the same executives that understand the need for training in these environments don't really seem to see the danger prevalent and existing in social media.

> "I think because the management structure of any major organisation is going to be naturally older than the people who are actually at the rock face, they didn't quite get it. I don't think that they understand how the daily barrage of crap, that's not daily but hourly, gets poured all over you on stuff like Twitter, can be absolutely soul destroying."

A number of comments left by survey respondents and in one-on-one interviews corroborate the view that some media executives simply see harassment and abuse to come with the territory. There is some evidence in the research that editors are not well-versed in newer forms of abuse found online and are not taking them as seriously as they need to. For example, a respondent had received persistent abusive emails, accusing them of inaccuracy when reporting on arrests of trans people. When their editor was alerted to this stream of abusive emails they simply told the respondent to ignore all of them. Another survey respondent corroborated this and said when abuse comes their way their editor tells them to just ignore it.

Despite many journalists in this research being victims of abuse as a direct result of their sexual orientation or gender identity, only 42% of respondents said their employer recognised specific risks faced by LGBTQ employees. Almost half (49%) of survey respondents said that they wouldn't know who to reach out to at their work for support, if they became the focus of a targeted harassment campaign on social media.

The majority of respondents (87%) agreed that their workplace is a place where they feel comfortable being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, this top-line figure obscures some other experiences that point to challenges in disclosing sexuality at work. For example, one respondent said they never had a problem being open about their sexuality as a student journalist, but when they worked professionally as a journalist they were not confident in being open about it with their editor because they knew he personally held anti-LGBTQ views. The survey also found that 18% of respondents faced abuse from colleagues, showing there is still work to be done if truly inclusive workplaces are to be achieved.

The term workplace is broad and may not cover all news-gathering activities, whether that be at news conferences or when speaking with sources in-person or online. Another comment left by a survey respondent speaks to the negative comments that can come when an LGBTQ journalist is open about their sexuality or gender identity. "Walking into press conferences and hearing myself identified as the gay one from [a national news organisation]. Hearing a colleague saying I can't work in sport as I can't understand it because I'm gay," they say. These quotes are, in isolation, inappropriate, but the fact that the perpetrators felt comfortable enough to verbalise these in a professional setting indicates a environment where people feel anti-gay speech can be shared without concern of the consequences. The fact that such definitively homophobic viewpoints are openly shared may be evidence for a workplace that hasn't made enough effort to be inclusive and make LGBTQ journalists feel comfortable in being openly LGBTQ.

A survey respondent said they felt they have often been "assigned LGBT+ stories by editors and assumed as a point of all queer knowledge by editors who aren't that well versed or who haven't done their own research. There is a sense that you are the gay spokesperson for the publication." It may be the case that an LGBTQ journalist may be well-placed to report on an LGBTQ issue due to their lived experience. However, it can be problematic to assign articles related to LGBTQ issues to reporters simply due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. As reporting on these topics can attract unwanted trolls and abuse for the journalist, unless LGBTQ journalists have a safety net and the tools to deal with this harassment, they may face a disproportionate level of abuse.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research paper has attempted to understand the interconnected and diverse range of experiences felt by LGBTQ journalists around abuse and harassment, as well as the level of support offered by media organisations to protect LGBTQ staff from abuse. While each participant reported a different mix of challenges and forms of abuse, a clear picture of high levels of abuse and harassment have emerged.

In addition to facing the same professional issues that non-LGBTQ journalists face, LGBTQ journalists contend with attacks directly related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The personal impact of abusive activities ranges from minor to career defining, with some journalists saying that dealing with harassment was a main reason for leaving their job. With LGBTQ journalists facing a disproportionate level of abuse, the lack of mental health support provided on a complimentary basis by media organisations is of concern. With the report finding that almost half (49%) of respondents do not have access to employer provided free therapy or counselling services, media executives would benefit from reassessing their current mental health offering to ensure the most vulnerable staff have the support they need.

The responsibility for training journalists and providing them with the necessary skills to thrive in an often toxic media environment isn't solely placed with media organisations. However, media firms should work to expand training offered to their journalists, especially those in their early-career, to specifically include threats that target LGBTQ journalists around homophobic abuse and harassment. Media executives deal with a lot of competing priorities and can't be expected to fully understand the nuances of all challenges facing their staff, especially at a time when these threats are regularly shifting and evolving. But the current experiences of LGBTQ journalists indicate that more attention should be given to this vector of abuse.

As this research shows, it would be beneficial for media executives to undergo some form of awareness training to better understand the impacts of abuse against LGBTQ journalists and provide best practice advice for staff who are tasked with combating abuse, especially in the digital space.

A consistent theme in response to this research is the lack of thoughtfulness and urgency around abuse that in most other industries would be serious incidents. The result of the relative unimportance placed on cases of abuse has led, in some examples, to LGBTQ journalists not reporting hate speech, in-person harassment and social

media threats to their employers. There is no single reason for the hesitation in reporting abuse, with a mixture of not believing the harassment rises to the level of reporting, not wanting to single themselves out as a 'oversensitive' journalist or simply not knowing who to report these attacks to all playing a role. For media organisations that do not currently have a formalised process to report abuse, this should be implemented to make the reporting process easier. In addition, all journalists should be encouraged to report all forms of abuse they receive and not place unnecessary barriers to limit reporting. An option to report these cases anonymously would also be beneficial.

Just collecting cases of trolling and abuse is not enough. Media organisations should proactively track and analyse reports that come in and work with journalists to help ameliorate the detrimental impact such abuse can have on staff. In practice, this may mean simply acknowledging the specific forms of abuse that are rising and sending out an email to staff reminding them of the resources available to them if they have become a victim of this behaviour.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, media organisations need to ensure that the focus extends from hiring staff from LGBTQ communities and moves to creating an inclusive environment, both in the workplace and the wider community, for LGBTQ journalists. Representation is not enough when LGBTQ employees do not feel comfortable being their true selves at work and fear the repercussions of being openly LGBTQ. New initiatives may need to be developed that move beyond achieving representation and help to foster an inclusive environment where LGBTQ journalists are comfortable in sharing their experiences of abuse with managers.

These recommendations are not exhaustive and represent only a starting point from where to build upon. It is hoped this research provides media executives with a better understanding of the challenges facing LGBTQ journalists around abuse, as well as the blind spots many media firms have around supporting LGBTQ staff. Of course, each media organisation will have their own unique challenges to contend with and some organisations will be more advanced when it comes to offering support to employees around abuse and harassment. But by setting out a number of evidence-backed solutions to the abuse faced by LGBTQ employees, a baseline can be established. Unless the challenge of abuse and harassment against LGBTQ journalists is contended with the media ecosystem will be less representative, LGBTQ stories will be silenced, harassers will feel emboldened and LGBTQ journalists will be forced out of the industry.

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