

Attacks on journalists show news media decisions on covering

It was a vile call for an attack on journalists, but like all abuse of power it manifested more acutely in gendered and racist ways.

“Play dirty,” exhorted Maxime Bernier, the populist boss of the People’s Party of Canada, to his base as he tweeted out the email addresses of three journalists who had sought comment about his party’s ties to the far right.

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On cue, the three journalists were heaped with abuse. Misogynistic, Islamophobic abuse.

A week or so later the vitriol has only ratcheted up. Canada was the leading country in the world for abuse against female journalists in September, according to the international advocacy group, Coalition for Women in Journalism, with at least 19 women targeted by organized troll campaigns.

On Oct. 1, at least half a dozen of my colleagues, mostly of colour, came forward to share the threats of violence, sexual assault and death that they received.

A landmark report by UNESCO in April titled “The Chilling” revealed that online attacks against women journalists are prevalent, organized and linked with disinformation and populist politics. And they’re leaking offline into real life.

In the Trumpian era of mistrust, I consider journalists the canaries in the coal mines of hate. What we face spills into other sectors — academia, education and advocacy, for instance.

But unlike other sectors, the news media has two unique abilities: one is to highlight these risks. The other is to ensure its own coverage doesn’t normalize social hatred. It’s the hand-wringing around the latter that carries the danger of what I call “the invisible chilling.”

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Truth to tell, while more journalists are facing a higher volume of vulgarity, the abuse itself is nothing new. I was reminded of this on a recent visit to the Star office where I picked up my mail.

While reader feedback is normal and often welcome, there has always been an element that takes disagreement into abuse territory.

Holding a letter of obscenities in hand is knowing this is no spur-of-the-moment thoughtless “trolling.” It is the awareness that the abuser has held the same paper, painstakingly written the message, bought a stamp, carefully stuck it to the envelope and gone to the mailbox to send it off.

The hate mail I get typically denigrates immigrants, belittles my country of birth, makes obscene gender- and race-based comments. “Hope your husband rapes you tonight,” wrote a reader once with no trace of irony in a note that railed against Islam and its perceived misogyny.

For far too long, the conventional advice in newsrooms has been to shrug off abuse as a rite of passage. “You must be doing something right,” someone will say. “You’re a real journalist now,” another will say as if it’s a badge of honour to be so singled out.

Many media leaders have stated their commitment to changing this culture.

At the Star today, journalists get generous mental health support packages (take that, haters!). But many Canadian journalists don’t have similar access.

Journalists are supposed to be thick-skinned veterans of cynicism who in their single-minded pursuit of stories can shrug off every insult, every threat. Or at least that’s what the movies tell us. I daresay some journalists have fallen for that image of themselves.