

# Journalists' Safety Study

July 2022



Department for  
Digital, Culture  
Media & Sport

REVEALING REALITY

# About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent social research agency with specialist understanding of how online harms unfold in the real world. We work extensively with regulators, government and the third and private sectors to provide insight into people's online behaviours, motivations and experiences, with an emphasis on understanding these within the context of people's real lives. Our work informs decision-making, policy recommendations and service design, and helps drive change.

Studying the ways the digital world is shaping people's behaviours is something we do every day. We frequently conduct both large-scale quantitative studies and detailed qualitative behavioural research – observing how people really use digital products, services and technology, and capturing data on these behaviours and related perceptions and experiences at scale. This includes exploring how digital design shapes what people do and think – across media and technology, gambling, financial products, the health service, and more.

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# Executive summary

A free press is considered a central pillar of democracy and journalists' role in holding those in power to account has long been recognised. However, the day-to-day realities of journalists' working lives and the structural realities faced by media organisations have changed vastly over the last 30-plus years. With these changes – digitisation, a 24-hour news cycle, social media – have come growing reports of journalists being exposed to abuse, threats, and violence in the course of their work.

These issues have wide-reaching implications for journalism and the quality of public discourse in the country. Widespread abuse and harm pose risks to the physical and emotional wellbeing of journalists and may act as a deterrent to those looking to join the profession or have a chilling effect on free speech as journalists change behaviour or censor their own work to avoid it.

In March 2021, the UK's first National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists was launched. Shaped by stakeholders across government, industry, civil society, and bodies responsible for law enforcement, the plan seeks to balance the importance of maintaining a free press and the need to protect journalists from harm.

To better understand the nature of abuse, threats and harm to journalists, and to provide evidence to improve the support they could access, DCMS commissioned Revealing Reality to do further research on the subject in the first half of 2022.

The **objectives of this research** were to:

- Learn about the prevalence of threats, abuse, and violence against journalists;
- Examine the perceptions of safety among journalists operating in the UK, including the impacts on their professional and personal lives;
- Explore journalists' engagement with the support provided by organisations including employers, the police, and social media platforms;
- Explore the kind of support journalists expect and/or desire from organisations.

This work is intended to serve as a benchmark against which to compare changes over time – to the prevalence of abuse, threats and harm; to their effects on journalists and journalism; and to the support available to prevent or mitigate them.

The research findings are based on evidence from a survey of more than 500 journalists working in the UK<sup>1</sup>, plus in-depth interviews with 10 journalists and two media outlets.

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## Key findings

### Experience of abuse

Three-quarters (76%)<sup>2</sup> of the journalists surveyed reported they had experienced some form of 'abuse' in the previous 12 months. This included a small number reporting physical harm or threats, and larger numbers saying they had received threats or abuse online. The nature of this online abuse varied from wishes of harm and incited pile-ons, to insults.

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<sup>1</sup> The online survey was available for journalists to complete between 7 March and 14 April 2022. The survey received 534 responses.

<sup>2</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: n=534. 76% selected at least one experience of abuse from a list.

## Perceptions of abuse

Less than half (47%)<sup>3</sup> of the journalists said they felt safe operating as a journalist in the UK today. Half (50%)<sup>4</sup> said journalists ‘had to accept’ they would receive some level of abuse or harassment online over their work and around a quarter (27%)<sup>5</sup> said they did not feel confident they could create and share work without fear of physical harm.

## Impact of abuse

Around nine out of 10 journalists surveyed (89%)<sup>6</sup> said their experience of abuse or their perceptions of its likelihood had had an impact on them. These effects ranged from feeling anxious or increasing personal security, to censoring their own content or their promotion of it. Some said they had considered changing their role or leaving the profession.

## Support for journalists facing abuse

Just under half (46%) of journalists who said they’d experienced abuse in the preceding 12 months reported that they had sought support from sources such as their employer, the online platform where it had occurred or the police<sup>7</sup>. When asked, many were not clear what more could be done to protect them from abuse or harm.

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## Opportunities

The scale and impact of abuse revealed by this research raises questions about how and where interventions could or should be made to reduce the overall impact of abuse on journalists and journalism.

The aim is to strike a balance so that journalists can do their jobs without fear or favour and are protected from abuse and threats to their safety, while ensuring that free speech is maintained, journalism can be challenged, and journalists can be held accountable for their work.

## Reducing the negative outcomes of abuse requires industry-wide prioritisation

Interventions designed to bring the sector closer to this balance are likely to need to consider the various consequences of abuse separately, at least to begin with, so they can be prioritised and any potential trade-offs can be considered.

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<sup>3</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: n=534. 47% selected “strongly agree” or “agree” with “I feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK today”.

<sup>4</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: n=534. 50% selected “strongly agree” or “agree” with “As a journalist, you have to accept you will receive some level of abuse or harassment online in relation to your work”.

<sup>5</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: n=534. 27% selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with “I feel confident that I can create and share journalistic content without fear of physical harm”.

<sup>6</sup> Table 3: Q23 ‘Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?’ and Q25. ‘As a result of any abuse, threats or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions?’ Base: total sample, n=534. 89% selected at least one impact from Q23 or Q25.

<sup>7</sup> Table 4: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’ Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 46% requested at least one form of support.

## There are opportunities to reduce the impact of abuse before and after it happens

### a) Prevention

With such a high proportion of journalists reporting 'abuse' of some kind in the previous 12 months, preventing abuse from occurring in the first place is an obvious route to reducing the overall scale of the problem. Agreeing what constitutes abuse, or which types of abuse it is considered most important to reduce, will help focus efforts and design targeted interventions. There are opportunities for the industry to learn from experiences and share what is working well.

### b) Awareness of and access to appropriate support

While many journalists reporting 'abuse' have sought support from employers, platforms and the police, many have not. This may be because the support isn't available, or it may be because journalists aren't aware of it. Improving access to appropriate support must be married with proactively increasing awareness of the support that is available. Findings from the survey indicate that journalists' awareness of key initiatives at the heart of the National Action Plan (such as appointments of designated safety officers and safety-related training) was also very low. This research has also revealed that there is little to no consensus on what such support is supposed to achieve, making it unclear to journalists when and how institutions can step in to attempt to reduce the negative consequences of receiving 'abuse'. There are opportunities here for employers and for the industry to work together to share what is working well, promote industry-wide initiatives and be clearer what all initiatives are intended to achieve. This could include organisations that train journalists, and membership organisations and other bodies that support them.

### c) Effectiveness of the support that is available

If the support available is more effective and provides journalists with more consistent results in terms of resolving challenges and ensuring they feel safe and able to conduct their work, this could go a long way to mitigating some of the negative consequences of abuse. Being clear what initiatives and support are intended to achieve makes it easier for the industry to practically assess what is working well, share evaluations and make changes over time.

With different outcomes to be addressed or mitigated, and different points in people's experience of abuse and harassment at which to intervene, there are multiple opportunities for policy and interventions to make a tangible difference. In each case, consensus will be required to make the most of these opportunities as they will likely require collaboration and consistency from actors involved – government, the media sector, tech platforms, police and the justice system, and journalists themselves.

# Introduction

A free press is considered a central pillar of democracy and journalists' role in holding those in power to account has long been recognised. However, the day-to-day realities of journalists' working lives and the structural realities faced by media organisations have changed vastly over the last 30-plus years. With these changes – digitisation, a 24-hour news cycle, social media – have come growing reports of journalists being exposed to abuse, threats, and violence in the course of their work.

Abuse of journalists is taking place in a context characterised by reduced and reducing public trust in British media<sup>8</sup> and concerns over increasing online abuse across the board. Adults and children alike describe exposure to bullying, abusive behaviour and inappropriate content online.<sup>9</sup>

The ways people consume news have also changed, with audiences increasingly turning to online sources, including social media and away from traditional news sources, such as television and print. While it has helped encourage citizen journalism and facilitate public debate, the widespread use of social media has led to journalists being subject to greater public scrutiny and abuse.

These issues have wide-reaching implications for journalism and the quality of public discourse in the country. Widespread abuse and harm pose risks to the physical and emotional wellbeing of journalists and may act as a deterrent to those looking to join the profession or have a chilling effect on free speech as journalists change behaviour or censor their own work to avoid it.

In March 2021, the UK's first National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists was launched. Shaped by stakeholders across government, industry, civil society, and bodies responsible for law enforcement, the plan seeks to balance the importance of maintaining a free press and the need to protect journalists from harm.

The objectives of the plan were to:

- Increase understanding of the threats journalists face while operating in the UK;
- Enhance the criminal justice system response in tackling crimes against journalists;
- Support journalists and their employers to build the resources they need to protect personal safety;
- Help online platforms tackle the wider issue of abuse online;
- Improve public recognition of the value of journalists.

One of the commitments outlined in the plan was that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Home Office would increase understanding of the problem. The two departments held a call for evidence for others' views on journalists' safety in June 2021. The call for evidence was intended to understand the nature and volume of threats, abuse, and violence that journalists face in the course of their work and their attitudes towards the response provided by employers, social media platforms, and the police and judiciary. This call for evidence received 360 responses about various aspects of the safety of journalists in the UK.

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## The objectives of this research

To better understand the nature of abuse, threats and harm to journalists, and to provide evidence to improve the support they could access, DCMS commissioned Revealing Reality to do further research on the subject in early 2022.

The objectives of this research were to:

- Learn about the prevalence of threats, abuse, and violence against journalists;
- Examine the perceptions of safety among journalists operating in the UK, including the impacts on their professional and personal lives;
- Explore journalists' engagement with the support provided by organisations including employers, the police, and social media platforms;

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<sup>8</sup> Reuters Institute, University of Oxford (2022) Digital News Report 2022

<sup>9</sup> Ofcom and Information Commissioner's Office (2020) Internet users' experience of potential online harms: summary of survey research

- Explore the kind of support journalists expect and/or desire from organisations.

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## **A baseline for measuring the scale of abuse and its effects on journalists and journalism**

This work is intended to serve as a benchmark against which to compare changes over time – to the prevalence of abuse, threats and harm; to their effects on journalists and journalism; and to the support available to prevent or mitigate them.

As discussed in this report, precise and objective measurement of such a complex area is not an easy task, and to reduce the experiences and perceptions of all journalists in the UK to a small number of statistics would be an oversimplification. The quantitative element of this work – which provides evidence of the overall picture of experiences and will allow for analysis of trends over time – has therefore been supplemented with in-depth qualitative evidence, enabling these experiences to be understood in more detail and with greater nuance.

Taken together, this work provides fresh, actionable and valuable data against which the effectiveness of interventions could be assessed, and change tracked, into the future.

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## **The need for consensus**

Perhaps inevitably, given the topic, the implications of this research are closely bound up with wider debates about public discourse, the use of social media and the need to protect people from harm online.

In particular, as discussed throughout this report, the research raises questions that require consensus in order to be dealt with effectively:

### **1. What constitutes abuse**

The lines between valid criticism and harassment, harm or abuse are often difficult to determine, and may be interpreted differently by different actors. Dealing effectively with issues of journalists' safety requires agreement on what does and does not constitute unacceptable behaviour – only then can it be consistently identified and dealt with by all relevant actors.

### **2. Where the balance should lie between protections and freedoms**

Any solutions to reduce the risks faced by journalists must meet two somewhat competing goals: protecting journalists from harm, and by extension, reducing the 'chilling effect' on their work; and ensuring the maintenance of healthy public discourse where journalism can be challenged and critiqued. Again, consensus is required to determine how to balance what may be, or appear to be, competing priorities.



# Prior research on journalist safety

This work builds on a small but growing body of literature on the changing nature of journalism and the impact of threats, abuse, and harassment on journalists, and public discourse more broadly. While there has been research on the nature of abuse experienced by journalists, the bulk of these studies have been qualitative in nature. The review of literature shows that prior studies undertaking quantitative research with journalists are limited in number. This section summarises key findings from studies undertaking survey research from the United Kingdom, United States and Europe.

In this section, the use of the terms related to abuse and harassment reflects that of the original studies cited.

The Call for Evidence<sup>10</sup> held by DCMS and the Home Office highlighted that a high proportion of journalists had negative experiences due to their work, with over 80% of respondents stating that they had faced threats, abuse, or violence because of their work in the UK. A national survey of U.S. journalists also found that journalists were subject to a high incidence of online harassment, with only 6.9% of respondents reporting no harassment across all survey items.<sup>11</sup> Within the UK, a survey focused on online abuse, conducted by Binns (2020)<sup>12</sup> found that only 6% of participants had never experienced any kind of abuse online.<sup>13</sup>

In a survey with 900 journalists across Finnish outlets, only 4% reported experiencing violent behaviour while 18% said that they had experienced serious threats of violence or destruction of property. In a large, broadly representative survey with Swedish journalists, a third of those surveyed had experienced at least one threat in the past year, while nearly a quarter had not experienced any threats or abusive comments in the past 12 months.<sup>14</sup> A survey about hate speech experienced by German journalists found that 72% are (almost) never confronted with hate speech directed personally at them. When isolating the respondents from 'Western European countries' in a study conducted for the Council of Europe, around 25% said that they had experienced physical assault over the past three years, and over half had experienced cyberbullying and 'physiological violence'.<sup>15</sup>

Findings from various studies also show that the incidence and/or type of abuse or harassment experienced differs across groups. In the Swedish study, crime reporters reported receiving the most threats. Columnists and opinion writers were also more likely to receive threats and abusive comments compared with other groups. Conversely, those working for magazines were less likely to receive threats. News journalists were found to be the most targeted group by gangs (online pile-ons) in the survey conducted by Binns (2017) with UK journalists.<sup>16</sup>

The Call for Evidence found that while violence was more commonly reported by men, women reported experiencing more bullying. Men also received more abusive comments compared with women in the Swedish survey. The U.S. national survey also found that female journalists were more likely to report experiencing online harassment compared with their male counterparts. The survey conducted by Binns (2017) found that women were much more likely to report receiving sexual insults or threats, though men were marginally more likely to report receiving other threats.

As evident from the discussion above, data across different studies is somewhat divergent on key observations. However, all the studies highlight the adverse impact of abuse and harassment on journalists. The most prevalent impacts identified in the Call for Evidence included avoiding certain places or crowds, being defensive

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<sup>10</sup> Call for Evidence report (2021). Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport and Home Office. The findings from the Call for Evidence can only be treated as indicative due to the small sample size and self-selective nature of participation. However, the sample obtained was representative on gender, location, and employment status (employed vs self-employed or freelance)

<sup>11</sup> Seth C. Lewis, Rodrigo Zamith & Mark Coddington (2020). Online Harassment and Its Implications for the Journalist–Audience Relationship, *Digital Journalism*, 8:8, 1047-1067. Lewis et al (2012). While the sample obtained in this study is broadly representative across demographic characteristics, it excluded those working freelance and/or part-time and for niche media outlets

<sup>12</sup> Amy Binns (2017) Fair game? Journalists' experiences of online abuse. *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 6 (2). pp. 183-206. This study limited its focus to online abuse, and due to a small, self-selecting sample, its findings cannot be extrapolated

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Monica Löfgren Nilsson & Henrik Örnebring (2016) Journalism Under Threat, *Journalism Practice*, 10(7), pp. 880-890. While this survey sample is representative in terms of critical factors, such as gender, age, education, and type of workplace, it overrepresents permanently employed journalists and those working within daily news

<sup>15</sup> Marlin Clark & Anna Grech (2017) Journalists under pressure: Unwarranted interference, fear and self-censorship in Europe. Council of Europe.

<sup>16</sup> Binns (2017)

in public and avoiding engaging with the public. In the UK, US and Europe, journalists reported changing their behaviour on social media to reduce their exposure to harassment. There is also recurring evidence of self-censorship: in another survey of US journalists, Miller (2021)<sup>17</sup> found that more than 25% of journalists surveyed said they avoided covering certain topics because of harassment, and a similar proportion of Swedish journalists reported doing the same.

With the exception of the Call for Evidence, there is limited focus on support mechanisms in prior research. In a survey of female US journalists, Carlson and Witt (2020)<sup>18</sup> asked respondents about the specific resources made available to them by their employers to manage online interactions. Here, support from co-workers and supervisors were the most cited options. The Call for Evidence found that perceptions of the police and social media platforms were largely negative, whereas employers performed slightly better when it came to journalists' confidence in institutions.

When comparing findings from other studies, it is important to note that they vary significantly on several aspects, chief among these being the differences in their socio-political context, and their definition or description of threats and abuse. Most existing quantitative studies do not deal with support mechanisms for journalists. Lastly, the survey distribution and sampling methods utilised for these studies vary significantly. Journalists have been recognised as a difficult group to survey,<sup>19</sup> often resulting in small base sizes. Due to this issue, some of the studies referred to above<sup>20</sup> do not test their findings for statistical significance. As a result of these issues, we lack generalisable findings on the scale and prevalence of threats, abuse, and harassment directed towards journalists.

This work was commissioned in order to fill this gap and provide generalisable findings on the scale of abuse experienced by journalists operating in the UK, which can be monitored over time. There are still limitations with this work in understanding the nuances of demographic differences. Further research focused on specific demographic groups could provide an opportunity to explore this in more detail.

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<sup>17</sup> Kaitlin C. Miller (2021) Harassment's Toll on Democracy: The Effects of Harassment Towards US Journalists, Journalism Practice

<sup>18</sup> Caitlin R. Carlson and Haley Witt (2020) Online harassment of US Women Journalists. First Monday, Volume 25, Number 11

<sup>19</sup> Logan Molyneux and Rodrigo Zamith (2022) Surveying journalists in the "New Normal": Considerations and recommendations. Journalism. 153-170

<sup>20</sup> Call for Evidence (2021) and Binns 2017

# Methodology and sampling

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## Questionnaire design

It was essential that the questionnaire was designed so that it accurately captured the wide range of people's experiences, both on and offline, and that it minimised the likelihood that questions – or their answers – could be open to interpretation.

It was also important to capture journalists' perceptions of abuse, harm, and safety not only as they applied directly to them but also more generally, as both personal experience and wider perception can have a bearing on people's behaviour.

The survey also captured information about their personal and professional characteristics to enable the researchers to explore patterns in the data and identify factors that correlate with 'abuse' and its impacts.

Building on previous research and working with the DCMS, National Union of Journalists (NUJ), Society of Editors (SoE), academic experts and the Home Office, the topics and framing of the questions were tested in qualitative interviews with journalists before wider dissemination.

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## Survey dissemination

The online survey was available for journalists to complete between 7 March and 14 April 2022. Journalists were invited to respond by research partners the NUJ and SOE, and the Revealing Reality team reached out directly to news organisations, membership bodies and on social media to encourage participation from a broad range of journalists.

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## Follow-up qualitative fieldwork

Follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 journalists and 2 media outlets using 30-90 minute interviews to explore specific incidents of abuse and the kind of support structures journalists were able to access. These interviews provided important additional context, nuance and clear examples of the many topics explored in the survey. To ensure anonymity, we have used pseudonyms for the respondents and removed any identifying details.

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## Sample background

The survey received 534 responses. Just over half (54%) of the sample said they identified as male, while under half (42%) identified as female.<sup>21</sup> It features journalists from diverse professional backgrounds, covering a wide range of job roles and topic areas. Outlets across the political spectrum are represented within the survey sample. Around a third of the sample report working as freelance journalists in some capacity<sup>22</sup>.

There were significant challenges associated with encouraging journalists to take part in the survey. Therefore, the sample size for certain groups of interest is small, which limits the extent to which we can make claims about those groups specifically. These groups include those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and journalists working in broadcasting and opinion writing. There are also a very small number of young people and student journalists within the sample. Because of the total sample size, and the number of journalists reporting certain personal characteristics, there are limits to the level of analysis possible. For example, it might be hypothesised that female sports journalists receive more online abuse than male sports journalists, but there are not enough male and female sports journalists in the sample to allow us to test this hypothesis meaningfully. Instead, comparisons must be made between more broadly defined groups (e.g. all sports journalists compared with

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<sup>21</sup> Table 5: Q55 "Which gender do you identify with?". Base: n=534. 42% selected "Female" and 54% selected "Male".

<sup>22</sup> Table 6: Q4 "Who do you do your journalism for?". Base: n=534. 9% selected "Contracted to one employer with some freelance", 20% selected freelance working for more than one outlet, and 3% selected "Freelance for one outlet".

other roles; or all female compared with all male journalists). For a full sample breakdown please see Appendix I.

It was communicated clearly throughout that the survey was relevant to all journalists working in the UK, regardless of their personal experiences and efforts were made to encourage journalists to complete the survey when they had experienced no abuse or harm as well as when they had. However, due to the topic and the varied distribution methods, it is reasonable to assume that journalists who felt they had experienced abuse in some form may have felt greater motivation to complete the survey.

The sample for the follow-up qualitative fieldwork was selected on the basis of survey responses about specific instances of abuse. It included journalists working across large and small media outlets, topic areas, and severity of abuse experiences.

#### **Note on statistical significance testing**

Statistical significance testing at the 95% confidence interval was conducted on the survey data. The value of this testing is that it indicates where differences between sub-groups (e.g. male vs. female respondents) are unlikely to be the result of natural variation in people's answers.

This means such differences can be reported with confidence that they are demonstrating 'real' differences between people's answers, driven, in some part, by the characteristic being evaluated.

However, this test is largely dependent on sample sizes – the smaller the sample sizes, the greater the differences need to be before they can be considered significant. Due to the limited size of our total sample, and specifically certain sub-groups, there are many situations where sample sizes prevent consistent or reliable testing at this confidence level. Therefore, there are several instances where the data suggests there are not significant differences between the answers of two groups, but this is not enough to claim differences do not or would not exist in reality. It is simply that we cannot confidently attribute differences in answers to certain characteristics with this data.

In this report we have reported on statistically significant differences, as well as wider trends of note. All are important to continue to track and understand over time.

# Improving safety: key metrics to track over time

As this was a baseline study, we hope the findings will form the basis for future comparison. This will allow the industry and policy-makers to track the impact of policies and interventions to improve journalists' safety.

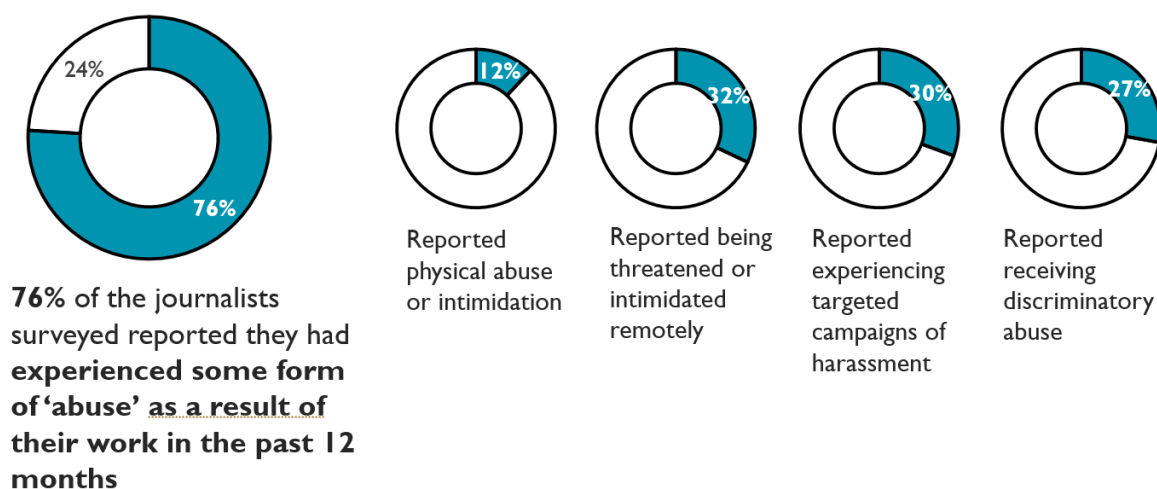
The survey was designed to provide a wealth of statistics that can be compared over time. Here we present an overview of the headline findings, which can serve both as a snapshot of the safety of journalists in the UK at this given moment in time, and a selection of key metrics against which industry-wide change can be measured in future.

As with the evidence in the rest of this report, we have focused on headline findings that give an overview of:

- Journalists' experiences of abuse, threat and harm
- Journalists' perceptions of abuse, threat and harm
- The impact that journalists' experiences and perceptions of abuse, threat and harm have
- The support that journalists have used and their experience of it.

## Direct experience of abuse

Figure 1. Percentages shown all of total sample <sup>23 24 25 26 27</sup>



<sup>23</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: n=534. 76% selected at least one of the options listed.

<sup>24</sup> Reported physical abuse or intimidation. Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?' Base: n=534. 12% selected at least one of the following statements "Been physically assaulted", "Been sexually assaulted", "Been physically intimidated (followed / visited at workplace / visited at home)", "Had your personal property damaged or destroyed (e.g. by graffiti, criminal damage)".

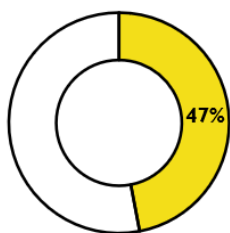
<sup>25</sup> Reported being threatened or intimidated remotely. Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?' Base: n=534. 32% selected at least one of the following statements "Been threatened with violence", "Received messages expressing a desire for harm or death to come to you", "Had people publicly call for you to be physically harmed", "Received death threats", "Been threatened with having your private information made public (e.g. home address, pictures of you from private media)", "Had private information about you made public (e.g. e.g. shared your home address, shared pictures of you from private media)", "Experienced actual or attempted blackmail", or "Been threatened with sexual violence".

<sup>26</sup> Reported experiencing targeted campaigns of harassment. Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?' Base: n=534. 30% selected at least one of the following statements "Had individuals encouraging others to abuse or harass you online (overtly or otherwise)", "Had individuals encouraging others to abuse or harass you online (overtly or otherwise)".

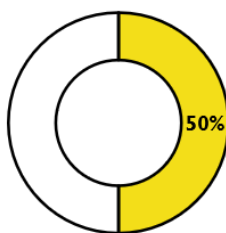
<sup>27</sup> Reported experiencing discriminatory abuse. Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?' Base: n=534. 27% selected at least one of the following statements "Received abuse that is overtly discriminatory (e.g. uses slurs or offensive language directly related to your personal characteristics)", "Received abuse that has undertones of discrimination (e.g. could be interpreted as being discriminatory and / or you believe has discriminatory intent)".

## Perception of abuse

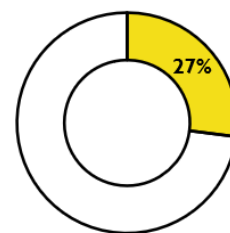
Figure 2. Percentages shown all of total sample <sup>28 29 30</sup>



**47% of the journalists said they “feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK today”**



**50% agreed “you have to accept you will receive some level of abuse or harassment online in relation to your work”**



**27% said they do not “feel confident they can create and share journalistic content without fear of physical harm”**

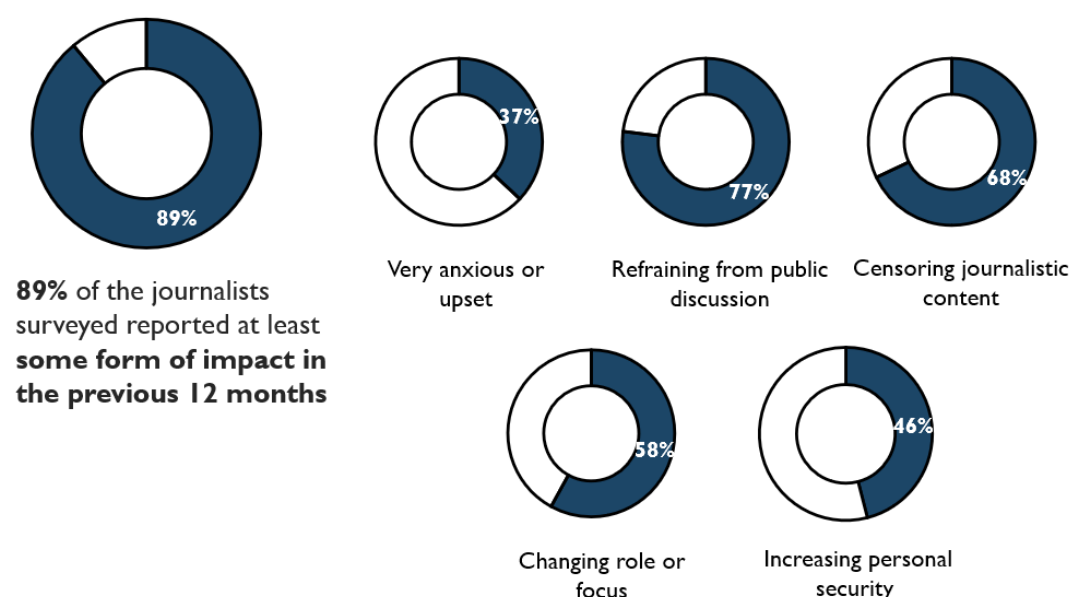
<sup>28</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: n=534. 47% “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement ‘I feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK today’.

<sup>29</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: n=534. 50% “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement ‘As a journalist, you have to accept you will receive some level of abuse or harassment online in relation to your work’.

<sup>30</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: n=534. 27% “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with the statement ‘I feel confident that I can create and share journalistic content without fear of physical harm’.

## Impact of abuse

Figure 3. Percentages shown are of total sample <sup>31 32 33 34 35 36</sup>



<sup>31</sup> Table 3: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' and Q25. 'As a result of any abuse, threats or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions?' Base: total sample, n=534. 89% selected at least one impact from Q23 or Q25.

<sup>32</sup> Very anxious or upset. Table 3: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions?'. Base: n=534. 37% selected at least one of the following options "anxious – a huge amount", anxious – quite a lot", "upset – a huge amount", upset – quite a lot".

<sup>33</sup> Refraining from public discussion. Table 3: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: n=534. 77% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements "Decided not to publicly discuss certain topics (e.g. on social media)" and "Chosen not to promote journalistic work on social media".

<sup>34</sup> Censoring journalistic content. Table 3: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?'. Base: n=534. 68% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements "Decided not to cover certain topics", "Your editor decided you should not cover certain topics / stories", "Changed your tone/style of reporting on a story (e.g. 'toning down')", "Had your work/reporting changed (by an editor) to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public", "Had previously published work edited retrospectively in response to potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public", and "Had outlets/employers refuse to publish certain work to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public".

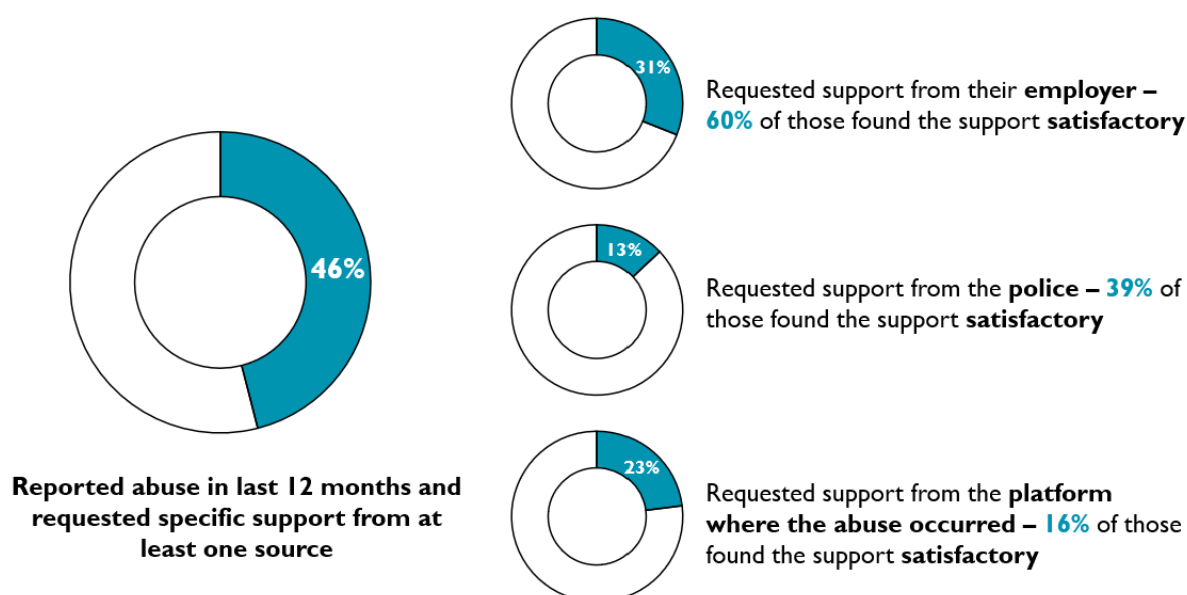
<sup>35</sup> Changing role or focus. Table 3: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?'. Base: n=534. 58% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements "Changed your role to be less publicly visible/exposed (e.g. less requirement to be on social media)", "Changed the topic areas you cover", "Changed which organisation(s) you work for", and "Considered leaving journalism completely".

<sup>36</sup> Increasing personal security. Table 3: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?'. Base: n=534. 46% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements, "Avoided attending events or visiting spaces where you felt your safety would be at risk", "Relocated yourself and/or your family", "Avoided visiting certain geographical areas", and "Put in place increased personal security measures (e.g. additional home security)".



## Support sought after abuse

Figure 4. Percentages shown in pie charts all of those who have experienced abuse. <sup>37 38 39 40</sup>



<sup>37</sup> Table 4: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?' Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 46% requested at least one form of support.

<sup>38</sup> Tables 7+8: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: n=406. 31% requested support from their employer. Q30 'And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?' 'Employer' Base: n=127 (have experienced abuse and requested support from their employer) 60% "very satisfied" or "quite satisfied" with the support of their employer.

<sup>39</sup> Tables 7+8: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse). 13% requested support from the police. Q30 'And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?' Base: n=54 (have experienced abuse and requested support from police) 39% "very satisfied or quite satisfied" with the support of the police.

<sup>40</sup> Tables 7+8: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse). 21% requested support from the platform the abuse occurred. Q30 'And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?' Platform where the abuse occurred' Base: n=92 (have experienced abuse and have requested support from platform where abuse occurred) 16% "very satisfied or quite satisfied" with the support from the platform where the abuse occurred.

# Scale of abuse

Three-quarters (76%)<sup>41</sup> of journalists responding to the survey reported they had experienced some form of ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months.

The overall scale of abuse reported by journalists in this survey is similar to that recorded in other studies, though as noted previously, the definitions of abuse vary significantly.

While this figure is high, it is important to recognise that ‘abuse’ as defined in this research includes a very broad range of experiences.

To understand the landscape of abuse among journalists in the UK, we necessarily had to categorise different experiences that could be thought of as abuse, harassment and violence.

The survey was designed to capture a wide range of experiences, from the severe – physical assault, sexual assault and criminal damage for instance – to those more open to interpretation, such as being insulted or being accused of bias.

Some things that are considered ‘abuse’ are relatively clear cut – it is accepted that being physically assaulted, for example, is abuse, and no one should be subject to physical harm. Others are more subjective, and what one person considers ‘abuse’, someone else may not.

In particular, the line between valid criticism of journalistic content and abuse can be difficult to determine. Where respondents to the survey provided open responses, and in the qualitative interviews, some of the examples of ‘abuse’ provided by journalists appeared to fall into the categories of disagreement and debate. When discussed in the qualitative interviews, many journalists agreed that it was extremely important that content be open to valid critique, and would not want any future measures to protect journalists to infringe on a reader’s ability to question and debate.

*“It shouldn’t be illegal to be rude. It should be unacceptable to be abusive.”* **Rob, national newspaper / website journalist** (all names used in this report are pseudonyms)

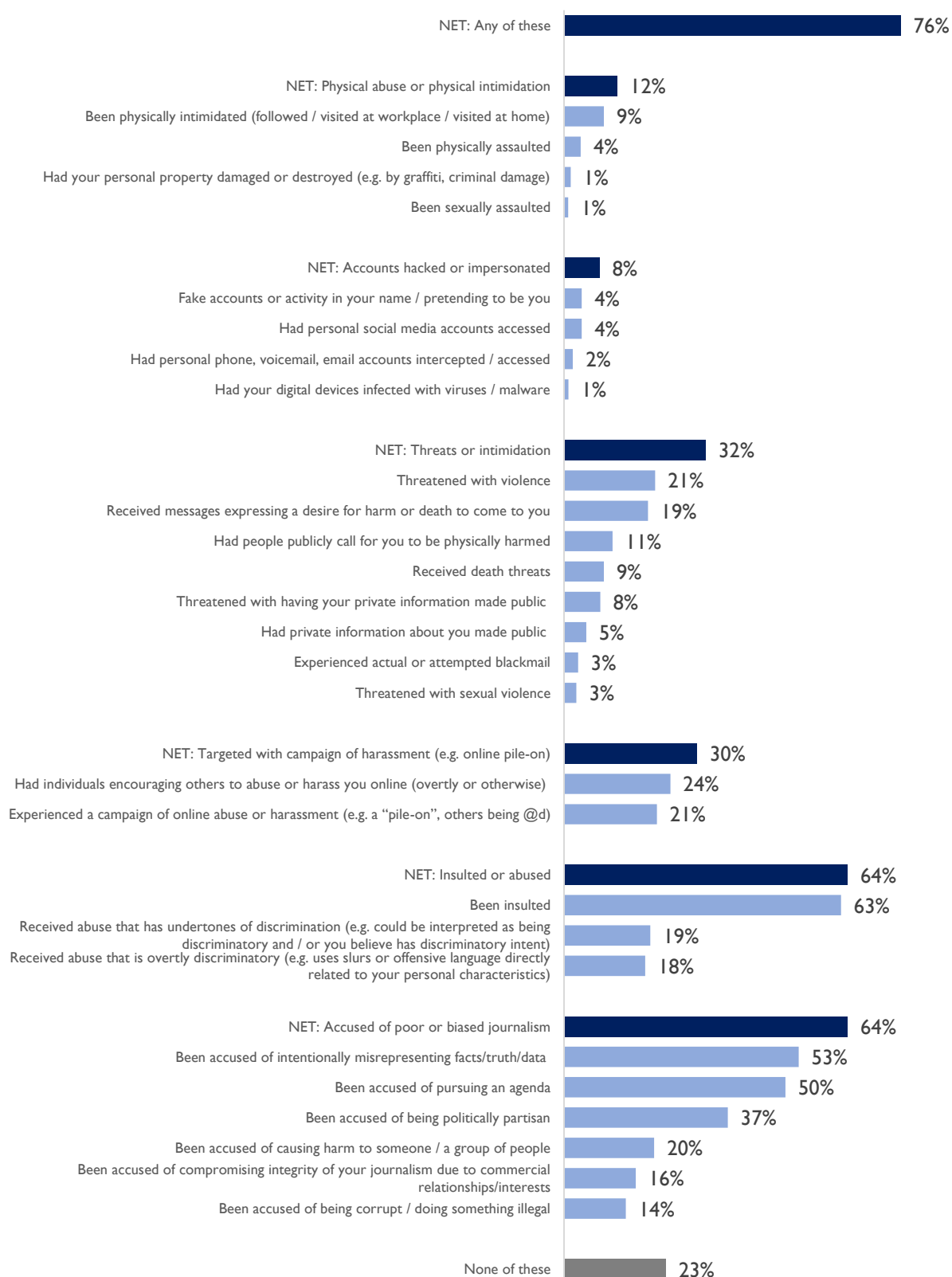
Emerging from this work is a clear need to reach a consensus, among journalists and those tasked with protecting and supporting them, on what ‘abuse’ is.

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<sup>41</sup> Table 1: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Base: n=534. 76% selected at least one experience of abuse from the list in this table.

## Types of 'abuse' reported by journalists responding to the survey in the previous 12 months.

Figure 5. Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months? Among total sample<sup>42</sup>



<sup>42</sup> Table 1: Q14 Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months? Total base: n=534

## Certain types of abuse were far more common

Depending on the type of abusive or threatening behaviour policy is intended to curtail, the rates of different forms of abuse are important to clarify. Broad categories of 'abuse' are set out below.

### Physical abuse or intimidation

Physical intimidation is much more common than violence, but a small number of journalists did report being physically (4%) or sexually assaulted (1%) in the previous 12 months. Around one in 10 journalists (9%) reported being physically intimidated.<sup>43</sup>

*"He effectively chases me back to my car [...] and he then starts basically smashing on the window to the point where I thought the window was going to come in."* **David, local reporter**

*"I got home and one of the small upper windows of my home office had been smashed with a brick...my youngest daughter was home alone...It unnerved me."* **Ed, investigative sports journalist**

### Threats or intimidation

Around one-third (32%) of the sample reported experiencing some form of threatening or intimidating communication<sup>44</sup>. One in five (21%) were threatened with violence or received messages expressing a general desire for harm or death to come to them (19%)<sup>45</sup>. Almost one in 10 reported receiving death threats in the previous 12 months, while smaller numbers said they had experienced attempted blackmail (3%) or threats specifically of sexual violence (3%).<sup>46</sup>

*"Court reporters, photographers, anyone covering the far right, anyone covering Islamists. You know, that sort of stuff is really where there are real physical threats."* **Rob, national newspaper and website journalist**

### Campaigns of harassment

Of journalists responding to the survey, 30% reported having been on the receiving end of targeted campaigns of harassment in the previous 12 months<sup>47</sup>, with one in five (21%) experiencing a campaign of online abuse and one in four (24%) reporting that people had specifically encouraged other people to abuse or harass them online.<sup>48</sup>

*"I'm not used to having a public profile and people even knowing who I am, let alone thousands of people saying horrible things."* – **Sarah, regional online reporter**

<sup>43</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Total base: n=534. 4% selected "been physically assaulted", 1% selected "been sexually assaulted" and 9% selected "been physically intimidated (followed / visited at workplace / visited at home)".

<sup>44</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Total base: n=534. 32% selected at least one of the following: "Been threatened with violence", "Received messages expressing a desire for harm or death to come to you", "Had people publicly call for you to be physically harmed", "Received death threats", "Been threatened with having your private information made public (e.g. home address, pictures of you from private media)", "Experience actual or attempted blackmail", or "Been threatened with sexual violence".

<sup>45</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Total base: n=534. 21% selected "been threatened with violence" and 19% selected "Received messages expressing a desire for harm or death to come to you".

<sup>46</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Total base: n=534. 9% selected "Received death threats", 3% selected "Experienced actual or attempted blackmail" and 3% selected "Been threatened with sexual violence".

<sup>47</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Total base: n=534. 30% selected at least one experience of the following: "Had individuals encouraging others to abuse or harass you online (overtly or otherwise)", "Experienced a campaign of online abuse or harassment (e.g. a "pile-on", others being @'d)"

<sup>48</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Total base: n=534. 24% selected "Had individuals encouraging others to abuse or harass you online (overtly or otherwise)" and 21% selected "Experienced a campaign of online abuse or harassment (e.g. a "pile-on", others being @'d)".

## Insults

General insults were the single most common form of ‘abuse’ reported in the previous 12 months by journalists (63%).<sup>49</sup>

Many journalists also reported experiencing overtly discriminatory abuse (18%), for instance using slurs or offensive language directly related to their personal characteristics, and one in five (19%) reported they had received abuse that could be interpreted as discriminatory.<sup>50</sup>

## Accusations of poor or biased journalism

Around two-thirds (64%) of those surveyed reported being at the receiving end of accusations of some kind<sup>51</sup>. Half were accused of intentionally misrepresenting data facts or data (53%) or of pursuing an agenda with their work (50%), and a third accused of being politically partisan (37%).<sup>52</sup>

One in five (20%) were accused of causing harm to others with their work.<sup>53</sup>

This is where the distinction between abuse and valid criticism is hardest to disentangle. On the face of it, accusing journalists of being politically partisan would likely not be considered ‘abuse’ by most people, including journalists themselves. The tone of such an accusation however, and how it is wrapped up with other far more obviously unacceptable forms of abuse, becomes important. Only 6% of journalists responding to the survey had only been accused of poor journalism, and not had other threats or abuse directed towards them, in the previous 12 months<sup>54</sup>.

Chris was accused on social media of lying and being threatening by the person at the centre of an investigative piece he had written, which he had no effective way to refute the accusation or have it taken down:

*“Through Facebook they don't deal with defamatory information [...] in terms of just defamatory lies, they say that's not against their rules. It's the same on Twitter. If somebody posts defamatory lies about you, they have no interest. They don't take it down.”* **Chris, investigate journalist**

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## The driver of abuse was often felt to be a general anti-media or anti-journalism sentiment

Asked what they perceived as the reasons that people targeted them and their work, over half the journalists surveyed (53%) said that the reason was always or usually ‘a general anti-media or anti-journalism sentiment’<sup>55</sup>,

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<sup>49</sup> Table 1: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Total base: n=534. 63% selected “been insulted”.

<sup>50</sup> Table 1: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Total base: n=534. 18% selected “Received abuse that is overtly discriminatory (e.g. uses slurs or offensive language directly related to your personal characteristics)”, 19% selected “Received abuse that has undertones of discrimination (e.g. could be interpreted as being discriminatory and / or you believe has discriminatory intent)”.

<sup>51</sup> Table 1: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Total base: n=534. 64% selected at least one of “Been accused of being corrupt / doing something illegal”, “Been accused of being politically partisan”, “Been accused of causing harm to someone / a group of people”, “Been accused of compromising integrity of your journalism due to commercial relationships/interests (e.g. with sponsors)”, “Been accused of intentionally misrepresenting facts/truth/data”, “Been accused of pursuing an agenda”.

<sup>52</sup> Table 1: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Total base: n=534. 53% selected “Been accused of intentionally misrepresenting facts/truth/data”, 50% selected “Been accused of pursuing an agenda”. and 37% selected “Been accused of being politically partisan”.

<sup>53</sup> Table 1: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Total base: n=534. 20% selected “Been accused of causing harm to someone / a group of people”.

<sup>54</sup> Table 40: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Total base: n=534. 64% of total sample experienced at least one of the accusations of poor or biased journalism, and 6% of the total sample experienced one or multiple of these accusations, but *none* other of the types of abuse listed as answer options in Q14.

<sup>55</sup> Table 9: Q18 ‘Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work?’. Base: Those who reported experienced abuse in the last 12 months, n=406. 41% selected “usually” and 12% selected “always” to the statement “A general anti-media or anti-journalism sentiment”.

while 52% reported it was always or usually that people ‘felt upset/offended by your work as it was at odds with their views’<sup>56</sup>.

Personal attacks on journalists were considered less of a motivation, although by no means rare – around one in four (27%) felt people were always or usually making personal attacks on journalists due to a perceived political position the journalist holds<sup>57</sup>.

Around one in five (22%) felt people’s motivations were specifically intended to silence journalists or public discourse<sup>58</sup>, suggesting that their work was always or usually targeted because people wanted to prevent or stop a specific investigation or story.

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## **While journalists do face some abuse in the real world, most of it appears to be taking place on social media**

In the survey, journalists were asked where they typically experienced each type of abuse or harassment they reported – whether it was in person, through different media of communication, or on social media. Across the board, journalists cited ‘publicly on social media’ as the most common medium through which they received abuse. Blackmail was reportedly the least likely to be received via social media.

Meanwhile, 36% of those receiving messages expressing a desire for harm or death reported that they received them through direct messages<sup>59</sup>.

While only a small number of journalists (n=14) reported experiencing actual or attempted blackmail, half of these said that they had occurred via email<sup>60</sup>. Those receiving insults, accusations related to the quality of their journalism and messages expressing a desire for harm or death to come to them also cited emails as a common medium of communication through which they received them.

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## **Journalists’ professional and personal characteristics influence their experiences of abuse**

There are many factors that correlate with the different forms of abuse reported by journalists in the survey, with professional and demographic characteristics both playing a role in what people reported experiencing and the nature of some of the ‘abuse’ they received. Factors that typically showed differences in experience and perception of ‘abuse’ reported by journalists include:

- The type of role journalists have – e.g. photojournalists, online features writers, investigative journalists
- The types of topics covered – e.g. politics, social issues, sports, business
- The type of outlet journalists create content for – e.g. whether it is overtly political, the reach it has
- People’s personal characteristics – e.g. gender, ethnicity

These are not distinct characteristics, and in many cases overlap. As noted previously, the sample size and composition creates limitations which make it difficult to determine what the driving factor behind reported

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<sup>56</sup> Table 9: Q18 ‘Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work?’. Base: Those who reported experienced abuse in the last 12 months, n=406. 38% selected “usually” and 14% selected “always” to the statement “They felt upset/offended by your work as it was at odds with their views”.

<sup>57</sup> Table 9: Q18 ‘Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work?’. Base: Those who reported experienced abuse in the last 12 months, n=406. 20% selected “usually” and 7% selected “always” to the statement “They were making a personal attack on you based on their perception of the political position you had taken in your work”.

<sup>58</sup> Table 9: Q18 ‘Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work?’. Base: Those who reported experienced abuse in the last 12 months, n=406. 17% selected “usually” and 5% selected “always” to the statement “They wanted to prevent or stop a specific investigation or story”.

<sup>59</sup> Table 10: Q16 ‘And where have these things occurred/how have people communicated with you? - Received messages expressing a desire for harm or death to come to you’. Base: Those who have received messages expressing a desire for harm or death to come to them, n=95. 36% selected the option “Privately on social media (i.e. a direct message)”.

<sup>60</sup> Table 11: Q16 ‘And where have these things occurred/how have people communicated with you? - Experienced actual or attempted blackmail.’ Base: Those who reported experiencing actual or attempted blackmail, n=14. 50% selected the option “Email”.

experiences of abuse are so it is not easy, and sometimes not possible, to state categorically which factor is most important.

### Note on sample sizes

Because of the total sample size, and the number of journalists reporting certain personal characteristics, there are limits to the level of analysis possible. In many cases it is not possible to combine two or more (personal and/or professional) characteristics and achieve a meaningful sample size. For example, the sample is not large enough to enable comparison between journalists with a similar professional profile but different demographic characteristics. For instance, if we wanted to analyse if there are any differences in the type(s) of abuse reported by female sports journalists compared with male sports journalists, we are unable to do so due to sample limitations.

## Journalists' roles influenced the types of 'abuse' they report being exposed to

There are very few experiences that are unique to certain groups of journalists, but there are some general trends within the data that are worth highlighting as these are recurring themes.

Professional characteristics such as role, outlet and topics reported on correlate with certain types of 'abuse' in patterns that would be expected. In this regard, our findings mirror those of pre-existing studies discussed above. However, there are no major differences in the abuse reported by journalists based on their employment status (i.e. whether they are exclusively freelancer or employed by an organisation).

### Physical abuse and intimidation

Physical abuse or confrontation was more likely to be reported by journalists whose work involves in-person reporting. For instance, 18% of photojournalists reported being physically assaulted in the previous 12 months<sup>61</sup> compared with 4% of the total sample<sup>62</sup>. Interviews with journalists also surfaced that local court reporters and people covering demonstrations or other public events are often much more likely to be caught up in physical situations due to the nature of their job.

*"I have to live within the community that I serve. And, you know, that makes it tough. It makes things like making sure your address isn't known and where you park your car, all those sort of things [important]. Really, you have to consider it all because ultimately, I'm living amongst the criminals and people that I'm reporting on, I haven't got that separation."* **David, local reporter**

Although very uncommon, the only reports of sexual assault in the survey were by female journalists<sup>63</sup>.

### Threats or intimidation

Violent threats and death threats were more often reported by male journalists<sup>64</sup>, while threats of sexual violence were reported almost exclusively by female journalists<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: people with roles of 'photography or photojournalism', n=33. 18% selected "been physically assaulted".

<sup>62</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: n=534. 4% report "been physically assaulted".

<sup>63</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months? – Been sexually assaulted'. Base: All male journalists (n=289) and all female journalists (n= 223). 2% of female journalists selected "been sexually assaulted" (n=5), no male journalists suggested this.

<sup>64</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: All male journalists (n=289) and all female journalists (n= 223). 8% of female journalists selected "received death threats" compared to 10% of male journalists. 17% of female journalists selected "been threatened with violence" compared to 25% of male journalists.

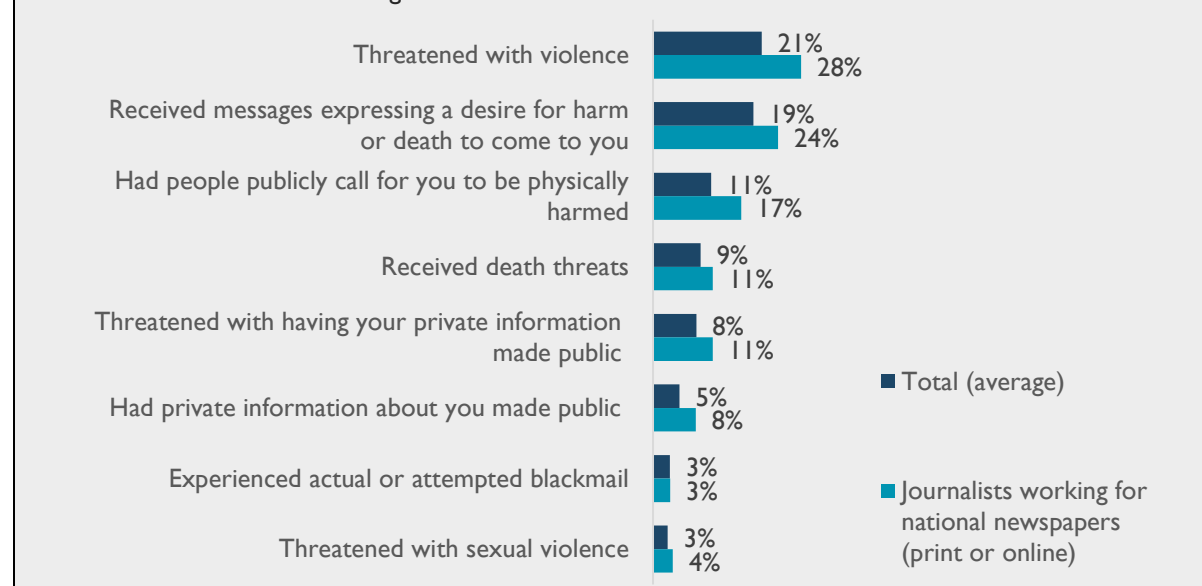
<sup>65</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months? – Been threatened with sexual violence.' Base: All male journalists (n=289) and all female journalists (n= 223). 6% of female journalists selected "been threatened with sexual violence" compared to less than 1% of male journalists (1/289).

*“The emails weren't to me. In fact, they were about me, but they were sent to our company lawyer [...] I don't know exactly what the emails were because I wasn't told, but what I was told was that it was threats of a sexual nature. So that's currently in the hands of the police who are looking to take to court on that one.”* **Amy, local court reporter**

Specific types of threat were also more closely associated with certain aspects of people's roles. Investigative journalists, for instance, were almost twice as likely to report being threatened with having their private information made public than the average (15%<sup>66</sup> compared with 8%<sup>67</sup>).

Journalists working for national newspapers were also slightly more likely to report most forms of 'serious threats' – possibly due to the greater exposure the public has to these journalists and their work<sup>68</sup>.

Figure 6. Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months? Forms of 'abuse' categorised as 'threats or intimidation'<sup>69</sup>.



## Online abuse, harassment and accusations

While there are distinctions between many of the specific types of 'abuse' within these categories, there were some general trends among those more likely to report receiving generalised abuse, insults and accusations online.

Most notably, journalists who work for national outlets, write content online and who work on issues such as politics or social issues were, on the whole, more likely to report various forms of non-physical 'abuse' and harassment. These trends would be expected to some extent due to the larger reach, and potentially profile, of their work, particularly online, and the likelihood for the topics covered in their work to generate heated discussion.

<sup>66</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base n= people with roles of 'investigative journalism' (n=165). 15% selected "been threatened with having your private information made public (e.g. home address, pictures of you from private media)".

<sup>67</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Total sample, n=534. 8% selected "been threatened with having your private information made public (e.g. home address, pictures of you from private media)".

<sup>68</sup> Table 13: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Total sample, n=534. 42% of those working for "National newspapers (print or online)" selected one or more experience of forms of abuse categorised as "threat and intimidation" as listed in Table 1, compared to 32% of the total sample, as shown in Table 1.

<sup>69</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?' Split by role, Base: Total sample, n=534 and Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?' Base: Total sample, n=534.

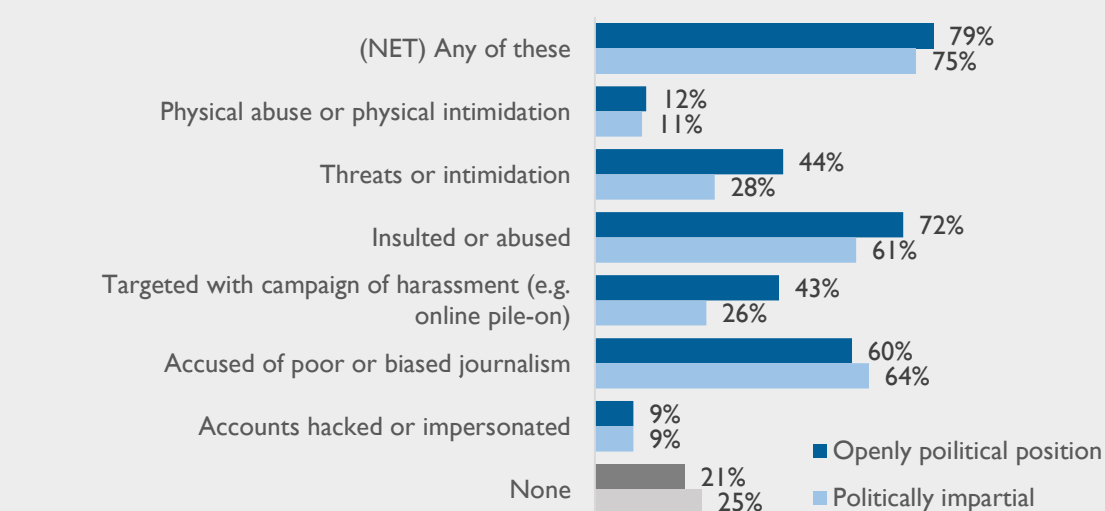


For example, one in three (33%)<sup>70</sup> journalists working for national newspapers reported having individuals encouraging other people to abuse or harass them online compared to one in four (24%)<sup>71</sup> of the total sample.

Journalists working for outlets they described as having an overt or stated political position were also more likely to report experiencing threats and insults in the previous 12 months, compared with journalists working for outlets they said were completely impartial<sup>72</sup>.

For example, 44% of journalists working for outlets they described as openly political reported receiving threats and intimidation in the previous 12 months<sup>73</sup> compared with 28% of journalists working for 'impartial' organisations<sup>74</sup>.

Figure 7. Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months? Forms of 'abuse'.<sup>75</sup>



BASE: Journalists reporting their main outlet has openly political stance n=75; main outlet is politically 'impartial' n=292

While those who work for overtly political outlets were more likely to be on the receiving end of abuse than those who do not, where that position was on the political spectrum did not appear to have an impact.

<sup>70</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base people with roles of "national newspapers (print or online)" (n=186). 33% selected "Had individuals encouraging others to abuse or harass you online (overtly or otherwise)".

<sup>71</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Total sample n=534. 24% selected "Had individuals encouraging others to abuse or harass you online (overtly or otherwise)".

<sup>72</sup> Table 12: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Journalists working for an outlet that they describe as politically impartial (n=292) and journalists working for an outlet they describe as taking an openly political position (n=75). 18% of journalists working for an outlet they describe as politically impartial, versus 33% of those working for an outlet they describe as taking an openly political position selected "been threatened with violence", 6% versus 15% selected "received death threats", and 59% versus 69% selected "been insulted".

<sup>73</sup> Table 14: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Journalists working for an outlet they describe as taking an openly political position, (n=75), 44% selected at least one experience of abuse categorised as "threats and intimidation", as listed in Table 1.

<sup>74</sup> Table 14: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Journalists working for an outlet they describe as "stating it is politically impartial", (n=292). 28% selected at least one experience of abuse categorised as "threats and intimidation", as listed in Table 1.

<sup>75</sup> Table 14: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: Journalists working for an outlet they describe as "stating it is politically impartial", (n=292); Journalists working for an outlet they describe as taking an openly political position, (n=75), % reporting their experience of each of the categories of abuse.

Journalists working for those on the political ‘left’ were no more or less likely to report a range of forms of ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months than those working for outlets on the ‘right’<sup>76</sup>.

*“They would pile on. So you get hundreds of people turning up saying almost exactly the same thing...It turns out that if enough people say the same thing, you end up questioning yourself. And then there’s just straight out abuse...unpleasant name calling, personal insults, threats against me and my family, and an awful lot of people just saying how I should kill myself.”* **James, gaming journalist**

## Demographic differences are in the detail, not the overall scale of ‘abuse’ faced by journalists

The relationship between abuse reported by journalists and their personal characteristics is nuanced and difficult to disentangle given the sampling limitations discussed above.

Within the survey sample, demographic differences alone do not demonstrate clear differences in the overall scale of ‘abuse’ reported by journalists. For instance, almost equal proportions of male (78%) and female (77%) journalists reported experiencing any form of ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months<sup>77</sup>, and similar proportions for different categories of abuse – for instance, 12% of male journalists and 13% of female journalists reported physical abuse<sup>78</sup>, 64% and 66% respectively reported being insulted or abused<sup>79</sup>.

In the qualitative interviews, Hanna, a broadcast journalist, felt she was more likely to face abuse as a visible, female journalist from a non-white background.

*“There’s no understanding for how uniquely abusive the comments are and you know, which will often be sexist and they’ll be racist as well. And of course, we’re likely to face intimidation from men.”* **Hanna, national broadcast journalist**

Ethnicity was slightly more likely to show differences at the total level within the survey results. The overall scale of ‘abuse’ reported by non-white journalists in the previous 12 months was slightly higher than white journalists (83% to 77%), although this is not statistically significantly higher<sup>80</sup>.

However, when looking at certain types of ‘abuse’ in more detail, and particularly journalists’ perceptions of the abuse they receive, there are much clearer distinctions between responses from journalists reporting certain demographic characteristics.

For instance, among those who reported receiving some form of ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months, some journalists were much more likely to perceive<sup>81</sup> attacks on their personal characteristics as a common reason for the abuse they receive. Asked what reasons they believed were behind instances when they or their work was targeted, 14% of female journalists compared with 7% of male journalists reported that it was ‘always’ or

<sup>76</sup> Table 12: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Base: Journalists working for an outlet they describe as “left” (n=118), and journalists working for an outlet they describe as “right” (n=37). Refer to Table 10 in Annex for a list of experiences of abuse across politically “left” and “right” outlets.

<sup>77</sup> Table 15: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Base: All male journalists (n=289) and all female journalists (n= 223). 78% of men and 77% females selected experiencing one or more type of abuse from a list of experience of abuses, as detailed in Table 1.

<sup>78</sup> Table 15: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Base: All male journalists (n=289) and all female journalists (n = 223). 12% of males and 13% of females experienced at least one type of abuse categorised as a “physical incident” as listed in Table 1.

<sup>79</sup> Table 15: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Base: All male journalists (n=289) and all female journalists (n = 223). 64% of males and 66% of females experienced at least one type of abuse categorised as a “Insults” as listed in Table 1.

<sup>80</sup> Table 16: Q14 ‘Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?’. Base: Journalists who identify as “white”, n=459, and journalists who stated they identify as an ethnic minority, n=48. 77% of journalists who identify as “white” reported experiencing at least 1 type of abuse from a list as detailed in table one, compared with 83% of journalists who identify as an ethnic minority.

<sup>81</sup> We use the word perceive here as personal characteristics may be inferred as the basis for the abuse, rather than personal characteristics being explicitly referred to in the abuse itself. The exact wording of the statement in the survey was “They were making an attack on you based on your personal characteristics”.

‘usually’ people making an attack on them based on their personal characteristics<sup>82</sup>. It was 31% among non-white journalists compared with 14% of white journalists<sup>83</sup>; and 17% among journalists identifying as lesbian, gay and bisexual<sup>84</sup> (LGB) compared with 9% among heterosexual journalists<sup>85</sup>.

### Understanding perceptions of discrimination

When it comes to discriminatory abuse or harassment, it is challenging to quantify the extent of this issue, and this work is reliant on journalists’ interpretation and perceptions of their experiences. While many instances of online abuse can be unequivocally categorised as overtly discriminatory, the intent behind many more cannot be determined.

Without much larger samples it is also difficult to disentangle personal from professional characteristics of journalists – we cannot look at differences or similarities between, for example, journalists covering the same topics and with similar reach, but of different ethnicities.

It also unclear whether ‘abusers’ would know the personal characteristics of a journalist they are targeting, and we cannot know the actual content of messages received that journalists are referring to when discussing discrimination.

Despite these limitations, it is clear that personal characteristics certainly play a part in people’s experience as journalists.

## Many journalists, no matter what their role or background, expected to receive some form of abuse

Abuse and harassment in some form are considered part of the job. Half (50%) of survey respondents agreed with the statement ‘You have to accept you will receive some level of abuse or harassment online in relation to your work’<sup>86</sup>.

*“I expect it, but I wish I didn’t because...I don’t like having people shouting at me and telling me I’m shit. It’s really demoralising. It’s not nice. I don’t think people would call up many other people in other professions and speak to them the way they do to us.”* **Amy, local court reporter**

What is ‘expected’ as a journalist was a theme explored in detail in interviews with journalists and employers. While there was consensus that no-one should receive or have to deal with abuse of any kind, there were differing opinions about what journalists should be ready to deal with. This largely rests, as much of this work does, on people’s definition of ‘abuse’.

*“I’m really happy to block an unpleasant commenter from a site. I don’t think that violates anyone’s free speech. But I don’t like the idea of not having to listen to dissent or a negative opinion...I welcome disagreement. There’s just a difference between disagreement and sending abuse.”* **James, gaming journalist**

<sup>82</sup> Table 17: ‘Q18 Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work? They were making an attack on you based on your personal characteristics’ – 14% of females (base n=223) and 7% of men (base n=289 male) selected either “Always this” or “Usually this”.

<sup>83</sup> Table 18: ‘Q18 Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work? They were making an attack on you based on your personal characteristics’. Base: Those who have experienced abuse, n=406. 14% of those who identify as “white” and 31% who identify as an ethnic minority selected either “Always this” or “Usually this”.

<sup>84</sup> We have used the term LGB rather than LGBTQ+ as participants in the final survey sample only included heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual individuals. We unfortunately were not able to reach transgender journalists, or journalists of other sexualities in our sample.

<sup>85</sup> Table 17: ‘Q18 Thinking about your experience over the past 12 months, what did you perceive were the ‘reasons’ people targeted you and your work? They were making an attack on you based on your personal characteristics’. Base: Those who have experienced abuse, n=406. 17% of non-heterosexuals including lesbian, gay, and bisexual (base n=48) and 9% of heterosexuals (base n=429) selected either “Always this” or “Usually this”.

<sup>86</sup> Table 2: Q26 ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?’. Base: Total sample, n=534. 50% selected “strongly agree” or “agree” to the statement “As a journalist, you have to accept you will receive some level of abuse or harassment online in relation to your work”.

## Ed's 'thick skin' meant he tolerated online harassment – until his home was attacked and his personal life targeted

Ed is an investigative journalist who has a wealth of experience reporting on high-profile corruption and financial impropriety and malpractice cases, focused primarily around sport. Ed has been a journalist for almost 30 years. He is experienced, respected and has built a reputation in his field. Over the years he's worked as a staff journalist and a freelancer for several national publications. Currently, whilst having his own website on the side, he is a staff writer at a major national paper.

Given this, he knows the range of challenges journalists can face for the work they do. When it comes to big investigative pieces of work, journalists are used to coming under the intense scrutiny of lawyers before and after publication - *"There have been legal letters and threats"* – and he felt confident that because journalists are held to a very high standard to corroborate claims, he was on safe ground. He never *"felt any danger or lack of safety"*.

This changed over the course of a few months in 2020.

Since he started covering a particular topic in 2013/14 about a specific sports club, Ed has received regular abuse and harassment online from fans. The content of this abuse usually centred around calling Ed corrupt, or just calling him crass and vulgar names. Having worked as a journalist for a long time, and having a fairly thick skin, this kind of abuse never bothered him.

*"It just gets to the point where it is water off your back. You just block or you know that it will die down in 24 or 48 hours. ... But it hasn't prevented me from writing what I deem to be important stories even knowing I will get abused."*

However, in 2020, this abuse and harassment went beyond what Ed expected or considered it reasonable to have to tolerate. Among the usual abuse about Ed being corrupt, and untrue claims about him impersonating other people, an anonymous Twitter account affiliated with a large fan forum posted Ed's home address on Twitter. Ed tried to contact Twitter to get it taken down, but the platform said it did not contravene their guidelines. After involving a friend and colleague who had a contact at Twitter, the post was eventually removed and the anonymous account was blocked.

However, knowing that a lot of the abuse directed at Ed lives on the fan forum, he visited it and realised his address had been posted there, too. The post with the address didn't include any direct incitement, but it was posted in the context of a lot of abuse, and there was an implication that people should 'do what they will' with the information.

Two days later, after he had spent the day looking after his wife who was in a hospice – leaving his younger daughter at home alone – Ed returned to find a brick had been thrown through the window of his home office.

Ed liaised with local police, who he said were "extremely helpful", though it was always going to be difficult to prove a connection between the brick through the window and the posting of his address. Plus the account that posted it was anonymous.

Whilst Ed had a brush it off attitude to most of the abuse he received – this was an escalation, and it "unnerved" him.

Not long after this incident, Ed's wife died, and the torrent of abuse he received started to take on a different tone. Amongst the usual crass insults and accusations, some of the abuse started referencing Ed's late wife, saying he had deserved what happened to him. Again, in contrast to the abuse he usually receives, this kind had a different impact.

*"I just felt disgusted by it... If I wasn't quite robust and coping okay, I might have found it really distressing."*

Over his career, Ed has experienced a range of abuse – it was only when it became a physical threat, and started focusing on deeply personal and private aspects of his life that he tried to address it. However, he still hasn't had a satisfactory solution to it, despite reaching out to the sports club to try to address the issue of fan-abuse head on.

# The impact of abuse

Less than half (47%)<sup>87</sup> of journalists responding to the survey said they felt safe operating as a journalist in the UK today. And more than a quarter (27%)<sup>88</sup> said they do not feel confident they can create and share journalistic content without fear of physical harm.

As the experience of abuse is wide-ranging, so too is its impact. Not only are there many different ways that journalists' own experiences and feelings can influence their personal and professional lives, but their perceptions of what others face can affect them too.

- Journalists' personal and professional decisions can be influenced without having faced personal or targeted 'abuse' themselves – many journalists attributed the impact on their own work to seeing what other journalists had faced.
- Perceptions can play a huge role in influencing behaviour, regardless of the reality of a situation or the true intentions of perceived 'abusers'.

*"I don't know when something like this might turn into something that's a real threat. I have so many friends and acquaintances who've been stalked or experienced receiving really horrible, abusive stuff. I worry that it could come out of nowhere and it'll be something really trivial that might spark it. And there's no comeback."* **Hanna, national broadcast journalist**

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<sup>87</sup> Table 2: Q26 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?'. Base: Total sample, n=534. 47% selected "strongly agree" or "agree" to "I feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK today".

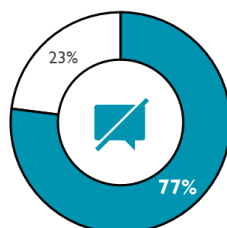
<sup>88</sup> Table 2: Q26 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today?'. Base: Total sample, n=534. 27% selected "strongly disagree" or "disagree" to "I feel confident that I can create and share journalistic content without fear of physical harm".

## Abuse of journalists can have tangible effects on journalists' personal and professional lives and decisions

The kinds of experiences journalists reported in the qualitative interviews and were asked about in the survey can be broadly categorised into four distinct groups, each of which were relatively widespread among the journalists surveyed. In the previous 12 months:

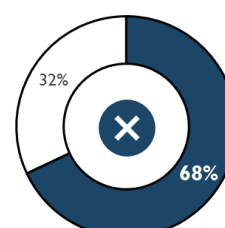
### Refraining from public discussion

Three quarters (77%) reported deciding not to engage publicly in discussion (e.g. on social media)



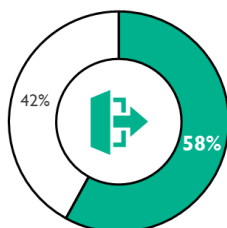
### Censoring journalistic content

Over two thirds (68%) reported having the content they create or publish limited or censored to some extent, either by themselves or editors



### Changing role or focus

Over half (58%) reported having changed their role or the focus of their work



### Increasing personal security

Nearly half (46%) reported having taken steps to increase personal security

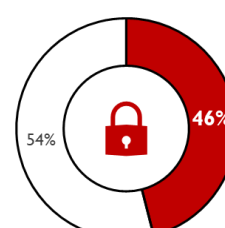


Figure 8. Frequency of experiencing impacts of 'abuse' in the previous 12 months reported by journalists responding to the survey<sup>89 90 91 92</sup>.

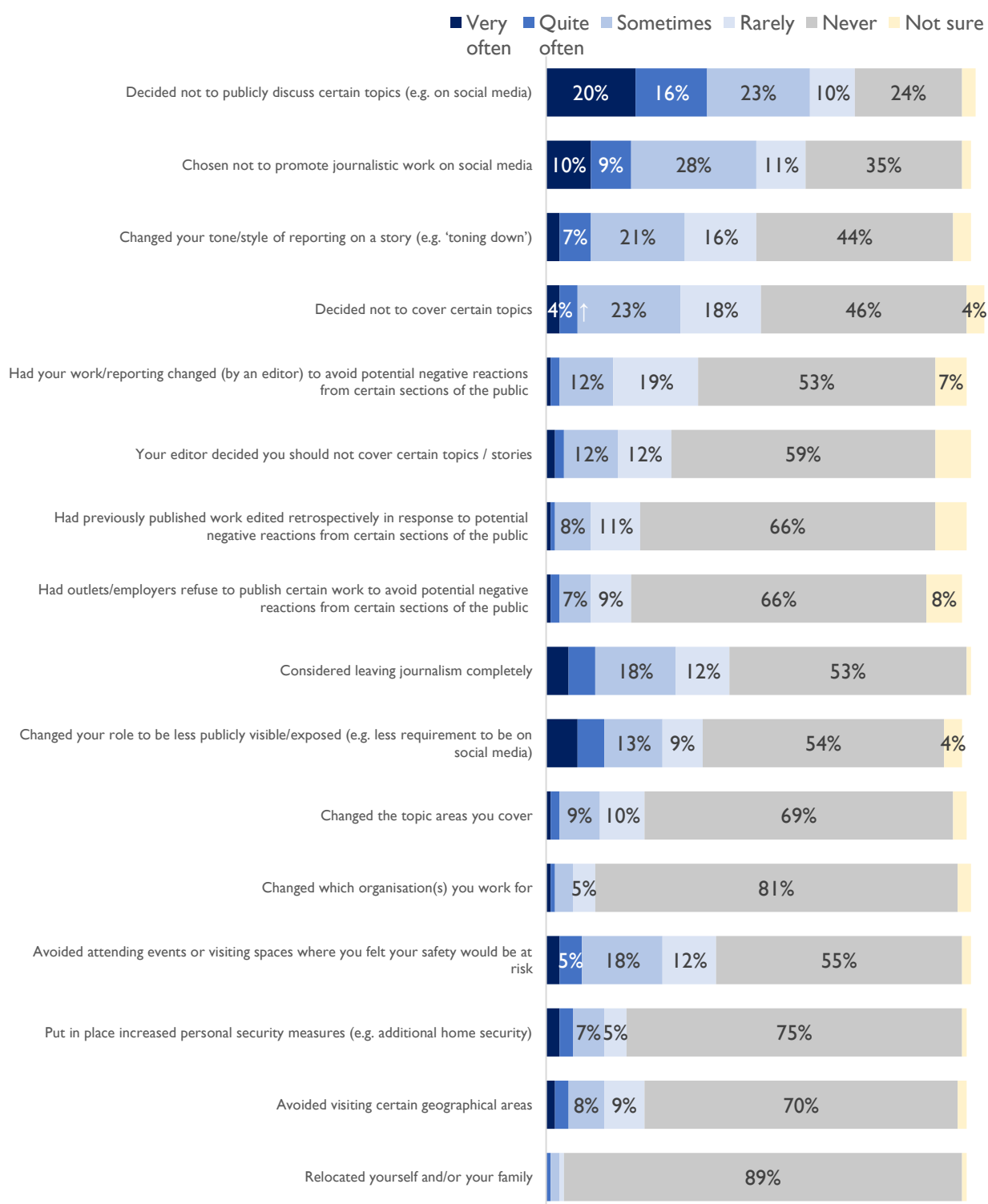
<sup>89</sup> *Refraining from public discussion.* Table 19: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 77% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements "Decided not to publicly discuss certain topics (e.g. on social media)" and "Chosen not to promote journalistic work on social media".

<sup>90</sup> *Censoring journalistic content.* Table 19: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 68% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements "Decided not to cover certain topics", "Your editor decided you should not cover certain topics / stories", "Changed your tone/style of reporting on a story (e.g. 'toning down')", "Had your work/reporting changed (by an editor) to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public", "Had previously published work edited retrospectively in response to potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public", and "Had outlets/employers refuse to publish certain work to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public".

<sup>91</sup> *Changing role or focus.* Table 19: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 58% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements "Changed your role to be less publicly visible/exposed (e.g. less requirement to be on social media)", "Changed the topic areas you cover", "Changed which organisation(s) you work for", and "Considered leaving journalism completely".

<sup>92</sup> *Increasing personal security.* Table 19: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 46% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to at least one of the following statements, "Avoided attending events or visiting spaces where you felt your safety would be at risk", "Relocated yourself and/or your family", "Avoided visiting certain geographical areas", and "Put in place increased personal security measures (e.g. additional home security)".

Figure 9. Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?  
Among total sample n=534<sup>93</sup>



<sup>93</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534

## Refraining from public discussion

Around one in five (19%) journalists reported that they often ('very often' or 'quite often') had chosen not to promote journalistic work on social media,<sup>94</sup> and a third (36%) had 'often' decided not to publicly discuss certain topics<sup>95</sup>.

This step back from public discourse was attributed as much to the experiences of other journalists as to the survey respondent's own experiences.

Deciding not to discuss certain topics publicly is not by itself evidence that high quality discourse in the UK is being stifled – there may be very good reasons for not discussing certain topics, and journalists do not have to promote work on social media. It also does not suggest that journalistic work is not being made – content is still accessible even if it is not heavily promoted on social media by the journalist who wrote it.

However, it does suggest that at least in some cases the potential for backlash tips the balance of what is 'worth' actively promoting publicly and could be having some effect on what journalistic content the public is exposed to.

## Censoring content

As well as journalists' own decisions to change their work, abuse or fear of abuse can lead colleagues or employers to take decisions to change what is published or how.

One in five journalists (20%) reported that they had experienced an outlet or employer refusing or choosing not to publish certain work to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public at least once in the previous 12 months<sup>96</sup>. One in three (35%) reported having their work changed by an editor for the same reason.<sup>97</sup>

Nearly half of the journalists reported changing the tone or style of their own reporting (47%)<sup>98</sup> or deciding not to cover certain topics (47%) in the previous 12 months<sup>99</sup>.

*"Over years and years and years you would routinely get, you know, just absolute dogs' [sic] abuse every time you wrote or Tweeted about these subjects. And so that had been for years to the point that, you know, in doing your job occasionally you're sort of thinking, shall I write this story? Or is it just not worth the inevitable pile-on that I will get? Ed, investigative sports journalist*

Respondents were just as likely to highlight the experience of other journalists as their own personal experiences as the reason for these decisions.

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<sup>94</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 19% selected "very often" or "quite often" for the statement "Chosen not to promote journalistic work on social media".

<sup>95</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 36% selected "very often" or "quite often" to the statement "Decided not to publicly discuss certain topics".

<sup>96</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 20% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to the statement "Had outlets/employers refuse to publish certain work to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public".

<sup>97</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 35% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes" or "rarely" to the statement "Had your work/reporting changed (by an editor) to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public".

<sup>98</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 47% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Changed your tone/style of reporting on a story (e.g. 'toning down')".

<sup>99</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?' Base: Total sample, n=534. 47% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Decided not to cover certain topics".



## Changing role or focus

Four in 10 journalists responding to the survey (41%) reported having considered leaving journalism in the previous 12 months<sup>100</sup>. Many had also taken active steps to change their role – one in three (35%) had changed their role to be less publicly visible or exposed<sup>101</sup>; around one in four (23%) had changed the topic areas they covered<sup>102</sup>; and a small number (10%) had changed the organisation they worked for<sup>103</sup>.

Personal experiences were much more likely to have prompted these decisions.

## Increasing personal security

A very small number of journalists surveyed (4%) reported having relocated themselves and their families in the previous 12 months.<sup>104</sup> While this may seem like a higher percentage than expected, it may be due to the self-selecting nature of our sample. It was not uncommon for people to report putting in place increased personal security measures such as additional home security – nearly one in five journalists (18%) said they had done this.<sup>105</sup>

It was more common for journalists to report simply avoiding attending events or spaces where they felt their safety would be at risk (38%)<sup>106</sup>.

As would be expected, it was predominantly personal experiences that drove these behaviours, although small numbers did suggest it was the result of the experiences of other journalists that had prompted them to take some measures – one in 10 of those who had put in place additional security, for instance, attributed this solely to others' experiences.<sup>107</sup>

*"We were told we should only be in the office with our editor or the sales director in the office. We shouldn't be going out to our cars on our own. We have a buddy system to go out of the office...and we were also given a panic alarm as well. I'm still carrying the panic alarm"* **Amy, local court reporter**

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## Abuse can also have an emotional impact on journalists

Within the total survey sample, one in three journalists reported feeling very anxious or upset as a result of their experiences.<sup>108</sup>

In examples discussed in qualitative interviews, there was usually a significant emotional component to the experiences described by journalists, in addition to the broader impacts on their day-to-day work, and in some cases their personal and family lives.

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<sup>100</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 41% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Considered leaving journalism completely".

<sup>101</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 35% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Changed your role to be less publicly visible/exposed".

<sup>102</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 23% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Changed the topic areas you cover".

<sup>103</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 10% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Changed which organisation(s) you work for".

<sup>104</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 4% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Relocated yourself and/ or your family".

<sup>105</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 18% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Put in place increased personal security measures (e.g. additional home security)".

<sup>106</sup> Table 20: Q23 'Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Base: Total sample, n=534. 38% selected "very often", "quite often", "sometimes", or "rarely" to the statement "Avoided attending events or visiting spaces where you felt your safety would be at risk.

<sup>107</sup> Table 21: Q24 'And do you believe these are a direct result of specific incidents you have had to deal with, or as a result of seeing what others in your field have experienced?'. Base: Those who have put in place increased personal security measures, n=96. 11% of those who have put in place increased personal security measures stated this was "As a result of other journalists' experiences".

<sup>108</sup> Table 19: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions? Base: Total sample, n= 534. 37% selected at least one of the following options "anxious – a huge amount", anxious – quite a lot", "upset – a huge amount", upset – quite a lot".

*“Still to this day [since the abuse], I still sleep with my phone, and my keys, next to me in bed. Just because I just kept thinking someone was going to break in” Sarah, regional online reporter*

Sometimes, the emotional response was channelled back into their work. Journalists were also likely to report these experiences leading to anger or a determination to work on the topics in question.<sup>109</sup>

## Having their professionalism publicly questioned and not feeling able to respond can leave journalists frustrated and upset

In many cases reported in the survey and qualitative interviews, journalists' integrity and professionalism were called into question. It is not possible to say which of these experiences are intentional and unsubstantiated and which might be legitimate critique, but when journalists perceive it to be the former, they reported feeling frustrated and upset that they were unable to do anything to 'clear their name'.

Accusations of poor journalism do not contravene any community guidelines and can be difficult to refute, meaning they are likely to remain in the public sphere. In addition, journalists were often advised by their employers not to enter the fray. Journalists were concerned about having negative and likely untrue information about them on the 'public record' and in the qualitative interviews several said they were frustrated their employers did not 'defend' them publicly.

*“I wanted them [her employer] to say, ‘Stop saying things that are untrue and defamatory about this journalist.’ And that never happened.” Sarah, regional online reporter*

Among those who reported experiencing at least one form of 'abuse' in the previous 12 months, nearly three in 10 (27%) reported feeling 'concerned or fearful about being associated with views which are considered unfavourably'.<sup>110</sup>

In some cases, these accusations might be utilised specifically to undermine journalistic work at other times those making the accusations may feel they are true, but journalists themselves strongly disagree that they hold the bias or beliefs they are being accused of.

*“Everything I received was defamatory. And it's not a level playing field. As journalists, we have codes of conduct and rules to abide by. Social media companies are not held accountable for the content on their platforms and have no interest in dealing with defamation. So now, if someone searched my name, these accusations would come up.” Chris, investigative journalist*

## Journalists reported different impacts of abuse depending on their experiences and personal characteristics

As would be expected, journalists who did not report experiencing any abuse in the last 12 months were the least likely to report censoring their content.<sup>111</sup>

However, a minority of journalists who reported they had not personally experienced any form of abuse in the previous 12 months still reported a range of effects. Of those reporting no abuse, for instance, 46% still reported that they had experienced at least some form of content censorship.<sup>112</sup> This could have been driven

<sup>109</sup> Table 22: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions?' Base: Total sample, n= 534. 11% answered "Angry – a huge amount" and 18% selected "Angry – quite a lot" 11% selected "More determined to work on that topic/ area/ piece – a huge amount" and 18% selected "More determined to work on that topic/ area/ piece – quite a lot".

<sup>110</sup> Table 23: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions?' Base: those reporting at least one experience of abuse in the last 12 months, n= 406. 27% selected "A huge amount" or "Quite a lot" to the statement "concerned or fearful about being associated with views which are considered unfavourably".

<sup>111</sup> Table 24: Q23. Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Censoring journalistic content' Base: Total sample, n= 534. 76% who experienced at least one abuse in the last 12 months selected "Very often", "Quite often", "Sometimes", or "Rarely" to experiencing "Censoring journalistic content" compared to 46% who experienced no abuse.

<sup>112</sup> Table 24: Q23. Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Censoring journalistic content' Base: Total sample, n= 534 76% who experienced at least one abuse in the last 12 months selected "Very often", "Quite often", "Sometimes", or "Rarely" to experiencing "Censoring journalistic content" compared to 46% who experienced no abuse.

by experiences that took place more than a year ago, or as a consequence of observing their peers, as highlighted above.

There are no major differences in the impact reported by journalists based on their employment status<sup>113</sup>. However, there were some notable differences across personal characteristics in the extent to which journalists reported being impacted, and in their interpretation of abuse.

Although overall rates of 'abuse' are similar between male and female journalists in the survey, female journalists who experienced abuse were more likely to report feeling upset<sup>114</sup>, anxious<sup>115</sup>, and concerned about their personal safety<sup>116</sup>, compared with their male counterparts.

A greater proportion of female journalists also 'strongly agree' with the statement "Threats and abuse online that I don't think will result in physical harm to me still have a significant effect on how I feel", as were LGB journalists.<sup>117</sup> Conversely, male journalists were more likely to 'strongly agree' with the statement "It is easy to distinguish between threats and abuse that are 'harmless' vs those that might be seen as a credible".<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Table 25: Q23. Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things? Censoring journalistic content' Base: Total sample, n= 534. There were no major differences by whether they work for one employer, are freelance working for one outlet, freelance working for more than one outlet, unemployed, or other.

<sup>114</sup> Table 26: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions? 'Feeling upset'. Base: n=534. 65% of females and 56% of males reported feeling upset – answering 'a huge amount', 'quite a lot', or 'a small amount' in response to the extent to which they have felt upset.

<sup>115</sup> Table 26: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions? 'Feeling anxious'. Base: n=534. 64% of females and 60% of males reported feeling anxious – answering 'a huge amount', 'quite a lot', or 'a small amount' in response to the extent to which they have felt anxious.

<sup>116</sup> Table 26: Q25 'As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions? Feeling concerns about their personal safety. Base: n=534. 49% of females and 44% of males reported feeling concerned about their personal safety – answering 'a huge amount', 'quite a lot', or 'a small amount' in response to the extent to which they have felt concerned about their personal safety.

<sup>117</sup> Table 27: Q26 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today? - Threats and abuse online that I don't think will result in physical harm to me still have a significant effect on how I feel'. Base: total sample (n=534). 30% females answered 'strongly agree' compared to 17% males. 38% LGB journalists answered 'strongly agree' compared to 21% heterosexual journalists.

<sup>118</sup> Table 27: Q26 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, as a journalist working in the UK today? - "It is easy to distinguish between threats and abuse that are 'harmless' vs those that might be seen as a credible". Base: total sample (n=534). 8% males answered 'strongly agree' compared to 3% females.

## **A predictable backlash to Sarah's story has left her scared for her safety and worried about what she writes**

Sarah is a regional reporter working for a national organisation. She normally writes for the website, covering any news stories that are relevant to the patch. These often focus on crime. It was off the back of one crime story that she became aware of a related issue she felt she should write a story about.

Early in her research, Sarah encountered resistance to her pursuing the story. After some internal discussions, Sarah's line manager told her she could continue working on the story. She then investigated it for several months.

It was clear this story, which included an element of reporting on transwomen, was likely to be seen by some people as contentious. There was a big internal debate, going right to the top of the organisation she worked for, about whether they should run the story at all. There were strident views on both sides. Sarah felt strongly it was important this story was told.

This internal debate went back and forth for over six months. Sarah found the experience very stressful, so stressful she considered quitting as a journalist and finding another profession.

In the end, the decision was taken to publish the story, but only on the condition that it had Sarah's by-line on it. She was against this, as were some others. But she agreed because she just wanted to get the story published. She feels that without her sheer determination and doggedness, the story would not have been published.

Knowing there was likely to be a backlash, a colleague advised her to take down her Twitter profile before it was published, which she did.

Once it was published, there was the inevitable reaction, with criticism online and directly to her employer. Sarah found the days after publication extremely difficult. She was stressed, scared and *"in a very bad way mentally"*. She lived alone and was taking her phone and keys to bed with her because she was worried someone might break in.

Her line manager and some other colleagues were supportive and kept checking in. She was told she could use the counselling service that the organisation had a contract with – which she did. But she felt the person on the phone wasn't equipped to help her deal with her situation. She was contacted by the NUJ rep in her region offering help but she wasn't sure what they could do, so she didn't take it up.

*"I'm not used to having a public profile and people even knowing who I am, let alone thousands of people saying horrible things... Until recently, most of my stories didn't even have my name on. And so I'd never dealt with anything like this before. And I didn't know what was going on. I was just a complete mess, to be honest. And I knew what would happen. So in a way, I was prepared for it. But nothing could have prepared me for it psychologically."*

She was – and remains – very worried what people would think of her, that they would attribute views to her that she didn't hold on the basis of the story she'd written.

*"I started thinking, 'Oh, what do people think of me?' And I still worry about that. That's the thing that affects me going forward."*

The backlash has left a lasting impact and she says she still feels scared that someone might come to her house.

The experience has really knocked her confidence in her job, making her *"paranoid"*. It has affected what she will cover, and what her editor will 'let' her cover. She also feels even more upset in retrospect that she wasn't allowed to publish her story without her by-line.

*"I really think stories are being missed and they're not being reported properly because journalists are scared,"* she says.

Some of the criticism she received was defamatory. She would have liked her employer to have publicly defended her journalistic professionalism and to have attempted to get defamatory online claims taken down.

However, Sarah feels strongly that despite the difficulty and stress she encountered getting the story published, and the backlash and criticism she has faced since, it was an important issue to report on and she's glad she did. She tells herself that most people don't hold views as extreme as those some people choose to share on social media. *"I just keep reminding myself that most people are quite normal,"* she says.

# Support

Around half of the journalists who reported ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months had not sought specific support.<sup>119</sup>

Both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research highlight that the support journalists seek out and receive in relation to the abuse they receive is extremely varied.

This variation includes journalists’ attitudes towards support. For some, the idea of receiving support for what could be seen as the unfortunate aspects of the job wouldn’t even cross their minds. For others, getting support from employers or relevant authorities is something that should be prioritised.

Attitudes towards support, or any kind of recourse, also depended on what journalists’ threshold was when it comes to defining or tolerating abuse. For some older, more experienced journalists, the day-to-day, flippant and reactive abuse they often received was par for the course and didn’t bother them. It was the deeply personal and harassment-style abuse that they thought needed addressing, particularly when it becomes physically threatening.

*“So while I’m an editor, I still write articles every now and then because I’m so battle hardened. I guess I’m willing to take on the subjects that some of the newer writers might want to avoid just because they know what the consequences will be. Although saying that they are incredibly brave and take it on.”* **James, gaming journalist**

Others found it hard to define a threshold when all abuse felt deeply personal.

Asked what he considered constituted abuse, one national newspaper journalist said:

*“When it’s directed at me, obviously! I mean, I joke, but that’s it, literally. You know, when someone says, I really think he’s completely got this wrong and it’s disgusting, I take that to heart, and I feel like that’s abuse. I think it’s quite hard to step back from the intensity of the personal experience. Genuinely, when I get any criticism, it feels like abuse. But I can see when I step back and look at others it’s more nuanced than that. And I’ve got to just learn to have a thicker skin and just deal with it.”* **Rob, national newspaper / website journalist**

Overall, there was general consensus that more needed to be done about the issue of abuse, and more support would be welcome. However, most journalists weren’t able to specify how this should be done or who should be responsible, and often didn’t trust that it was seen as important enough to change.

About half the journalists who reported ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months (46%) had sought out specific support.<sup>120</sup>

Among those who did not seek any support despite experiencing abuse, 29% said this was because the abuse they faced did not bother them enough. Just over a fifth (22%) said they see it as part of their job, and a similar proportion (23%) said it was because they felt that nothing could be done about it.<sup>121</sup>

When it came to awareness of specific support provisions or measures (some of which are included in the National Action Plan), journalists’ awareness of these appeared to be mixed: as the chart below shows, awareness of initiatives introduced by platforms and the police was the lowest, while training and guidance for journalist safety were more likely to have been heard of and/or engaged with by journalists.

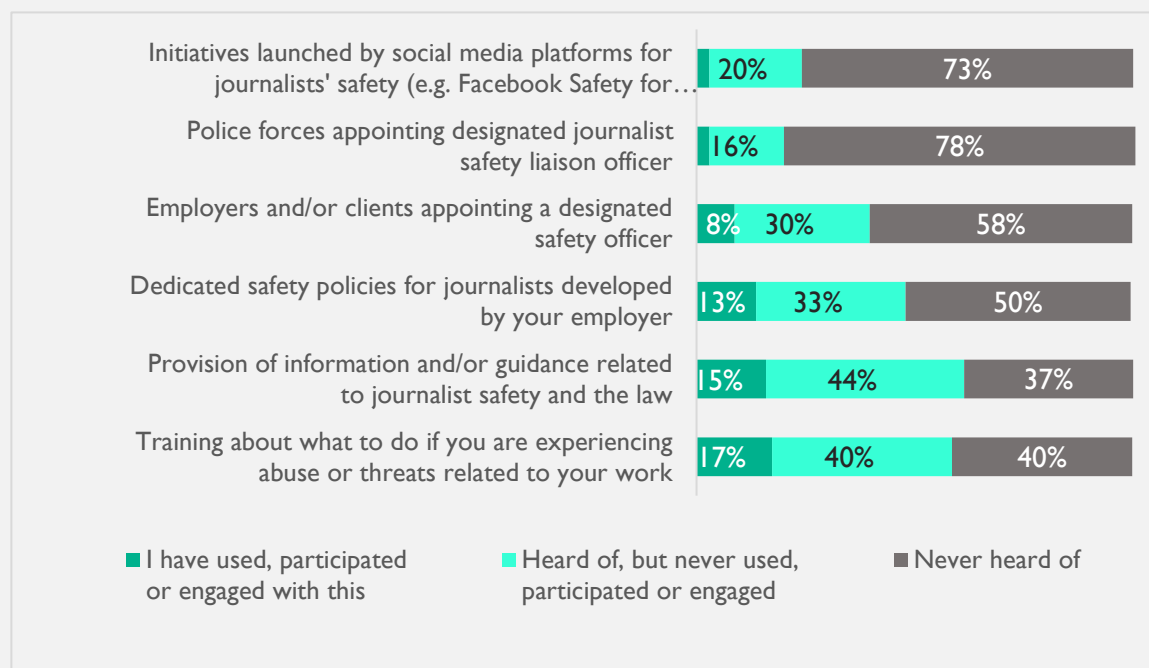
<sup>119</sup> Table 4: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’ Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 46% requested at least one form of support.

<sup>120</sup> Table 4: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’ Base: total sample, n=534. Of those who had experienced abuse (Q14, n=406), 46% requested at least one form of support.

<sup>121</sup> Table 28: Q29 ‘Why did you not request any support?’. Base: those who did not request support, n=328. Those who have experienced at least one form of abuse (Q14) and did not request any support (Q28), n=213. 29% selected ‘It doesn’t really bother me enough to get others involved’, 22% selected ‘I see it as part of my job’, 23% selected ‘I felt nothing could be done about it’.

## Journalists' reported awareness and engagement with specific support measures

Figure 10. How familiar, if at all, are you with the following measures that have or could be taken by employers, Police and the government to support journalist safety? Among total sample (n=534)<sup>122</sup>



Engagement with dedicated safety policies was higher among court reporters: 22% of court reporters stated using or engaging with dedicated safety policies for journalists developed by their employer, compared with 13% of the total sample.<sup>123</sup> Their higher engagement is likely due to the fact that their work exposes them to more abuse in person (as discussed above), increasing their need to engage with these safety policies.

Those who were formally employed by a media organisation were more likely to seek support than those who were working exclusively as freelance journalists. Around six in 10 (59%) of those who were staff journalists stated they hadn't requested any support in the last 12 months. Among those who only did freelance work, this figure was 74%.<sup>124</sup> This may be because they did not believe they were entitled to support or were not likely to be given it if they did ask.

Only 8% of those surveyed reported requesting support from journalist unions or membership bodies in the last 12 months.<sup>125</sup>

Journalists reported varying levels of confidence in the ability of different organisations to take appropriate action to safeguard journalists when needed. While over half of the journalists surveyed said they had

<sup>122</sup> Table 29: Q36 'How familiar, if at all, are you with the following measures that have or could be taken by employers, Police and the government to support journalist safety?' Base: n=534.

<sup>123</sup> Table 30: Q36 'How familiar, if at all, are you with the following measures that have or could be taken by employers, Police and the government to support journalist safety?' Base: n=534. 22% of journalists who selected 'Justice system and/or court reporting' as their main topic of report, said that had 'used, participated or engaged with 'Dedicated safety policies for journalists developed by your employer'.

<sup>124</sup> Table 31: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced and/or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: total sample, n=534. 59% of those who selected 'All my work is for one employer' or 'I am contracted to one employer and do some other freelance work as well' (Q4) said 'No – I haven't requested any support', 74% of journalists who selected 'I am freelance working for more than one outlet' or 'I am freelance working for one outlet' (Q4) selected 'No – I haven't requested any support'.

<sup>125</sup> Table 32: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: n=534. 8% said they have 'requested specific support' from 'a journalist membership body / union'.

confidence in their employers and membership bodies, almost four in five journalists (78%) said they did not believe that digital platforms would act appropriately.<sup>126</sup>

## Support from employers

In general, journalists described the support their employers offered to deal with abuse as varied and often ad hoc.

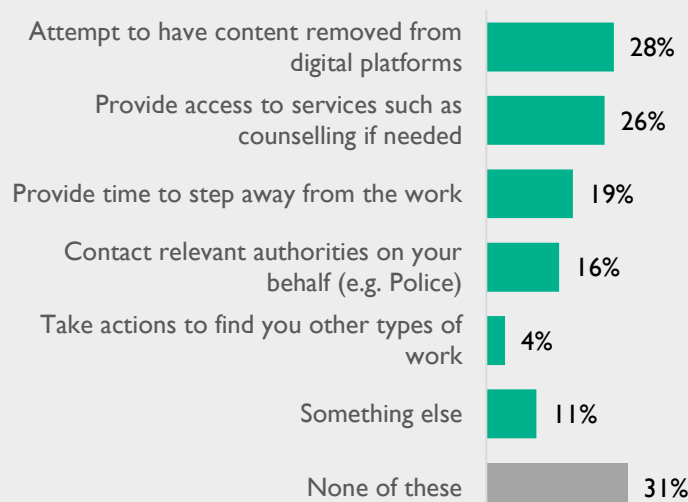
Often, journalists who had received abuse didn't request any kind of support. Around four in 10 (42%) of those who had received abuse stated they had never requested any support from their employer.<sup>127</sup>

The majority of those who *had* requested support from their employer were satisfied with it, although 'satisfaction' is largely subjective - depending on each person's expectations, and does not necessarily mean that a situation was resolved.

Some journalists knew there were mechanisms put in place by their employer for them to use if they needed support. The chart below shows the actions taken by employers to safeguard journalists.

### Actions commonly taken by employers in response to request for support

Figure 11. Did your employer provide any of the following practical or psychological/emotional forms of support or assistance? Among those who had requested support from employers (n= 127)<sup>128</sup>



However, these were not always seen as useful.

*[Is there a structure in place, for example, your employer or your company that you can go through to get support for this kind of thing?] "Yes, they have. I've never accessed it though because as I say, this doesn't cause me particular mental anguish. [...] But if you are distressed about it, there is a point of contact. They created a journalist abuse report form. But I don't think it's any kind of remedial service."* **Chris, investigative journalist**

Some journalists in the interviews described being given quite 'basic' training on use of social media, for example not disclosing your location, alongside other standard training, for example media law.

<sup>126</sup> Table 33: Q35 'If you were to experience abuse or threats in future that you felt constituted a credible risk to your personal safety, how confident would you be that the following organisations would be able to take appropriate actions to mitigate or resolve the situation?'. Base: total sample, n=534. 57% stated they would be 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' that their employer would take appropriate action, 51% stated that they would be 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' that journalist membership bodies or unions would take appropriate action, 78% selected 'Not particularly confident' or 'Not at all confident' to digital platforms being able to take appropriate actions.

<sup>127</sup> Table 34: Q27 'How frequently, if at all, do you talk to, request support from or use tools supplied by the following people or organisations in relation to abuse, threats and violence that you have experienced or could experience as a result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: those who had experienced abuse, n=406. 42% selected 'Never' for 'Your employer'.

<sup>128</sup> Table 35: Q32 'Did your employer provide any of the following practical or psychological/emotional forms of support or assistance?'. Base: among those who had requested support from employers, n=127.



## Journalists' expectations of employers

Training for line managers on how to support journalists, resources for journalists, providing a safe space for journalists to report issues and ask questions, as well as setting expectations for the use – or not – of social media, were all highlighted as areas employers could be doing more to support journalists.

Some journalists mentioned that employers could be clearer with journalists that they didn't 'have' to be on social media, that it wasn't a requirement of their job.

Several raised the possibility of courts providing security staff who could protect court reporters or prevent situations getting heated or out of hand.

Some journalists said they and their colleagues had been advised not to work alone in an office, but this guidance generally sounded locally determined rather than a blanket policy. The same was true for the support line managers were given – some journalists suggested there should be organisation-wide policies in place for how line managers should support staff who encountered abuse, threats or harm.

Often journalists found it difficult to imagine what else could be done to support them.

However, one thing many journalists agreed on was that their employers could show more public support for their employees who have been subject to abuse.

*"It's like when a toddler falls over and even if they had been an idiot, the first thing to do is to give them a hug and tell them they're okay and then we'll deal with what the hell you were doing later. [It] should be: 'Okay. I can see what's happened here. We'll have a word. But right now, I've got to dive in and take that bomb for you'. If the institutions want to protect their journalists, they need to put themselves between the mob and the individual."*

**Rob, national newspaper and website journalist**

*"I just don't think enough care goes into how they respond when a news story is generated by a person about a person. I think the [organisation]'s track record in failing to defend its presenters has been shocking in its lack of duty of care."*

**Hanna, national broadcast journalist**

Predictably, the difference in provision of support often depended on the type and size of organisations. Larger media organisations often had employees whose role was dedicated to safety or support, whereas smaller, independent organisations often didn't.

## Some employers recognised they could or should do more

Interviews with employers were not part of the methodology originally agreed for this research. However, in the course of the work, we did have contact with some employers, and we interviewed a small number of employers and staff working specifically on journalist safety to garner additional insight.

Like frontline journalists, employers reported it was not always clear, or there was not always consensus, when action should be taken or what external support was available for their staff. For example, deciding at what point police should be involved or where abuse crosses a line was often open to discussion.

One employer described being relatively well positioned "to deal with real catastrophes" and confident that journalists and editors were supported to take straightforward safety measures such as not posting where they are and setting up two-factor authentication. But they had identified a gap in the support available "in the middle" and were preparing new guidance setting out clearer expectations and advice around social media, including not having to use it.

*"The day-to-day experience, especially being a woman or a person of colour, or a football reporter. The abuse can be incredibly personal,"* **National newspaper**

One employer had found that freelance journalists sometimes appeared to feel less able to ask for support from the organisations they are writing content for than staffers. But the organisation had been taking steps to ensure freelancers recognised that help was available if they needed it.

*"The difficulty we have with freelancers is because they come in and then go out again, and we don't necessarily have them as a permanent members of staff, they sometimes might not feel like they can report. But I do try to make it really clear that actually I'm here for freelancers just as much as I'm here for permanent members of staff."* **National and regional newspaper group**

Asked about journalists' calls for their employers to defend them publicly, one employer said they weren't convinced it was always helpful.

*"There's a difference between people who criticise our journalism and people who criticise our journalists. If you come out and defend, is that going to help or hinder that person? The advice we normally give is: don't join in. You can very rarely win an argument with someone on social media by telling them that you're right and they're wrong. We want to make it clear that we've got our journalists' backs, but joining the fight on social media might not necessarily be the best way of demonstrating that."* **National newspaper**

It was important, however, to provide support, to offer to monitor social media on employees' behalf sometimes, give staff a day off if they needed a break, and follow up with them even when the initial abusive activity may have subsided, one employer said.

Some employers had, or were putting in place, a job role dedicated to journalists' safety at their organisation. Some had protocols in place to deal with abuse, and social media guidelines which included advice and guidance on preventing or responding to abuse. Some also provided training on these topics.

*"I'm looking to see where we can identify training needs, support needs, policy changes and development. And looking to see what the organisation and what the individual employees need as well."* **National and regional newspaper group**

But based on what journalists told us, certainly not all employers had taken these measures.

Employers and journalists alike said they thought the industry could do more to share experiences – not only of best practice but also of challenging incidences of abuse and what they had learned from them.

*"There is no point in me doing absolutely loads of work around online safety and strategy and then [other media organisations] doing the same thing, and all pedalling really hard to get to a certain point when actually if we pool our resource work together, there is much more opportunity. And I think that this is probably one of the biggest challenges, because there is still a perception of rivalry between news outlets, for example, which might mean that there's reluctance to collaborate in that way."* **National and regional newspaper group**

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## Platforms

The advent of social media and citizen journalism has led to a sea change in the way journalists operate. As data from the survey corroborates, social media platforms are widely used by journalists to promote their work and engage in public debate. Twitter and Facebook stood out as the most widely used online platforms in our survey sample.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, it is unsurprising that a significant proportion of the journalists surveyed report experiencing a variety of abuse, harassment, and insults publicly on social media platforms.<sup>130</sup>

*"Social media is wonderful in so many ways for getting information out, but it's also terrible in the fact that people can be so nasty"* **Ellen, local broadcast journalist**

However, only 17% of the journalists surveyed reported requesting support from online platforms.<sup>131</sup> Those who had sought support from online platforms reported that blocking or suspending users and removing content were the actions most commonly taken by platforms in response.

### Actions commonly taken by online platforms in response to requests for support

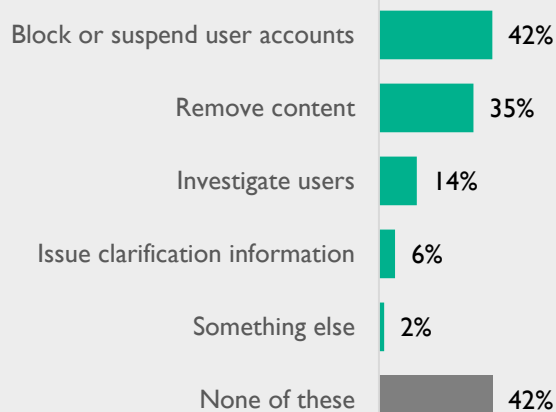
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<sup>129</sup> Table 36: Q11 'Which platforms do you use most in a professional capacity, to share or promote your work to the public?'. Base: n=534. 78% selected 'Twitter' and 46% selected 'Facebook'.

<sup>130</sup> Table 37: Q16 'And where have these things occurred/how have people communicated with you?'. Base: n is between 14 and 327 depending on the abuse that has occurred. Please see table for % of responses for each abuse that occurred 'Publicly on social media' and 'Privately on social media (i.e. a direct message)'.

<sup>131</sup> Table 32: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?'. Base: n=534. 17% selected 'The platform it occurred on (if relevant)'.

Figure 12. Did platforms provide any of the following practical support / assistance? Among those who requested support from platforms (n=88)<sup>132</sup>



However, 42% stated that platforms did not take any action.<sup>133</sup> This is mirrored by the low rate of satisfaction with online platforms – only 16% of those who had sought support from platforms reported being satisfied with their response.<sup>134</sup>

The low level of satisfaction with platforms' response reported in the survey is mirrored by the qualitative findings. Journalists raised several concerns related to online platforms during interviews. The lack of clarity over platforms' community guidelines on offensive and/or inappropriate content was a recurring theme. One journalist stated that Twitter's policies lacked nuance and did not seem take context into account when deciding if a tweet was abusive.

*"There was another Tweet which I complained about...where someone had talked about me as a cockroach, and I just thought: that word, it's so loaded, and I think it's racist. I complained to Twitter and they dismissed it and said, well, it's fine. And I just think there's no understanding of how certain words when they're used against certain people have a particular meaning"* – **Hanna, national broadcast journalist**

Another journalist remarked that platforms did not tackle sexism and racism effectively, stopping short of taking action against content unless it explicitly called for someone to be killed or sexually assaulted.

This issue dovetails with the need for establishing an industry-wide consensus on what constitutes abuse, in order to ensure consistency in the actions taken to safeguard journalists.

One journalist during the qualitative phase also highlighted the issue of the defamation of journalists, arguing that platforms could do more to respond when this happens.

*"The government should impose a requirement on social media companies to act when journalists are being defamed"* – **Chris, investigative journalist**

Another issue was the slow nature of platforms' response. An employer stated that getting platforms to act against abusive content was typically a lengthy process, and one that was difficult for individual journalists to pursue. Some journalists also felt that there was no consistency in the way platforms reacted to reports of abuse, which led to feelings of frustration.

Several journalists reported in interviews that where they had had 'success' in asking platforms to remove content or block users, they had only done so by using personal connections to bypass platforms' standard redressal processes.

<sup>132</sup> Table 38: Q33 'Did platforms provide any of the following practical support / assistance?'. Base: n=88 (those who requested support from platforms).

<sup>133</sup> Table 38: Q33 "Did platforms provide any of the following practical support / assistance?". Base: n=88 (those who requested support from platforms). 42% said 'None of these'.

<sup>134</sup> Table 39: Q30 'And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?'. Base: n=534. 16% selected "very satisfied" or "quite satisfied" with the support received from "Digital platforms or the tech companies who run them".

*“There were a couple of people, including I think the managing editor of [the large national newspaper] who had dealt with issues around Twitter before so he had somebody at Twitter who he knew. There was obviously contact between the paper and somebody at Twitter, because once it was formally raised later, it was eventually taken down. When I just reported it myself as a ‘blue tick’ Twitter account...they sent a response saying they’d reviewed the content and didn’t find any violation of their policy”* **Ed, investigative sports journalist**

Both the employers we spoke to reported putting measures in place to help journalists manage their online presence to reduce their exposure to online harassment. Simultaneously, employers were engaging with platforms to encourage further action on their part.

Not all employers were willing to publicly criticise the platforms, but they tended to echo frontline journalists’ criticism that there were not consistent or effective systems in place to respond to abuse of journalists.

One employer felt there was little incentive for platforms to act against abusive content and said they would like to see a dedicated system for media organisations to report abuse.

*“I don’t think the platforms are necessarily well-enough equipped to deal with the issues. I think it seems to depend sometimes on one person’s relationship with another person’s relationship... We’re beefing up our system, but it seems to me there’s also scope for the platforms to very much beef up the response that they’re able to provide. I’m not sure they’ve got what I would call a system in place.”* **National newspaper**

The other employer interviewed was of the opinion that although online platforms were willing to take some steps, their response was not swift enough to keep pace with the constantly changing online world.

[Certain provisions outlined in the Draft Online Safety Bill (OSB) have implications for the issues outlined above. Firstly, the OSB mandates the introduction of ‘user empowerment tools’ on large social media platforms, which will allow users to control who they interact with and the kind of content they see. The OSB exempts the bulk of journalistic content shared on the social media platforms from moderation. It also requires platforms to create expedited routes of appeal for journalists if their content is moderated. However, the extent to which they will help or hinder safeguarding journalists’ safety remains to be seen.]

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## Police

Of all the support structures covered in this research, journalists’ engagement with the police was the lowest. This may be because journalists involve the police on fewer instances of abuse, typically those at the more severe end of the spectrum, for example, serious threats of violence or sexual assault.

Among those interviewed during the qualitative strand of the research, many felt the police had a very limited role to play when it came to online abuse, or said they did not know when to get the police involved.

*“The police were extremely sympathetic and asked how I wanted to take things forward. I said I only knew his identity as [X] an anonymous abusive...account on Twitter. I was told that if I could find his identity and he lived in [X], for example, they could pass on the information to the [X] Constabulary. But I said I didn’t know his identity and couldn’t prove it was him [the anonymous account]...[In the end] I just said I wanted it to be on record that this has happened, so if anything else happens, you know, it’s on record.”* **Ed, investigative sports journalist**

From our survey sample, only 13% of journalists experiencing abuse sought police support.<sup>135</sup> Experiences among those surveyed also appear to be mixed, with 39% of those who sought police support reported being satisfied with the police’s action while 31% were not.<sup>136</sup>

In many cases, the police weren’t approached until things got physical – and even then, couldn’t always help. Ed, who had his window smashed by a brick, said the police were “absolutely helpful...and took it extremely seriously”, but given that the online post which had potentially incited the attack was by an anonymous account, there wasn’t a huge amount they could do.

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<sup>135</sup> Table 7: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced and/or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’ Base: n=406 (those who have experienced any abuse). 13% selected “the police”.

<sup>136</sup> Table 39: Q30 ‘And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?’ Base: n=534. 39% selected “very satisfied” or “quite satisfied” with the support received from the police.

But often journalists within the qualitative sample who had sought police support were very happy with the response they received. Adam received calls threatening violence from the subject of a story he had written:

*“My editor was brilliant and said, well, we'll tell the police. In fairness to the police they're very good [...] They took it very seriously and dealt with it very swiftly. [...] He was convicted. He pleaded guilty to that and was fined. And now he's got a restraining order, which means he can't contact myself or anyone at [Adam's paper].”* **Adam, local court reporter**

## Amy was largely happy with the support she received after she experienced threats of violence from the subject of a story

Amy is a reporter at a local newspaper, owned by a large media group. She covers a range of stories but is the person responsible for courts and crime reporting on her team.

Amy regularly attends the local courts to report on cases and uses the court registers for information on cases she can't attend in person. She generally feels safe when attending court, however she is supposed to take pictures of defendants outside, which she never does as she worries this could incite confrontation.

*"We're told we're supposed to be taking things like snap pictures of people outside court and videos [...] I'm not doing that because I'm not going to get caught doing that outside the court where there's no one who can come and intervene. But no one [at the paper] has ever picked me up on it."*

The stories she writes about court cases quite regularly result in defendants ringing up her workplace and demanding the story be removed or edited. Sometimes the person can be quite threatening and angry, usually about their name and address being published. However, Amy says that once she or her editor has explained their reasoning for publishing the story, and that addresses legally have to be included on stories of this nature, they usually back down.

In one instance though, the negative reaction she received about a court story was more serious.

Amy had used information from the court registers to write about a man convicted of knife and drug possession. He was unhappy about the story being published and called up the news desk multiple times to complain. He then came into the office, when only one member of staff was present, and threatened to hit the editor of the paper.

A couple of months later he got in touch again, this time via emails to the company lawyer. The emails contained disturbing threats of a sexual nature towards Amy, as the author of the article.

*"It's not the first time I've had threats made or someone turn up at the office, but it's the first time it's been that bad."*

The media group that owns the paper Amy works at took the threats very seriously. They held a Zoom call with all staff members to talk through new safety procedures in the event the man returned to the office, including a requirement that there should never be only a single person in the office. All staff were given a panic alarm and Amy was told to work from home for two weeks to lay low and ensure she was not approached in the street by the man.

*"I was told not to go to court because my editor was concerned about my safety being in such a prominent place basically. And so, you know, it's quite nice to have that."*

She was grateful for the concern for her safety and the time off, but was frustrated that this meant she couldn't carry out one of the central parts of her job.

*"I was really annoyed not to be able to go, to be honest. I was glad not to in a way, because obviously [...] it's really obvious where I am, in the same place every week. But it's really deeply annoying because obviously it's a small county. It's not the most exciting news patch. So court is a really important bit of what we do"*

The paper also notified the police, both when the man came to the office, and when he sent the email threats. Amy felt the police's initial reaction was quite slow and doesn't think they did anything about the first incident in the office. However, once the threats had been sent via email the police were contacted again and took it much more seriously, with the matter still being under investigation at the time of the interview. Amy was generally happy with the overall police response, however she would have liked to have been shown a picture of the man, as she didn't know what he looked like and was concerned about bumping into him.

*"I did say to them that I didn't know what he looked like and that was worrying. And there was no offer to show me a picture or anything."*

# Opportunities

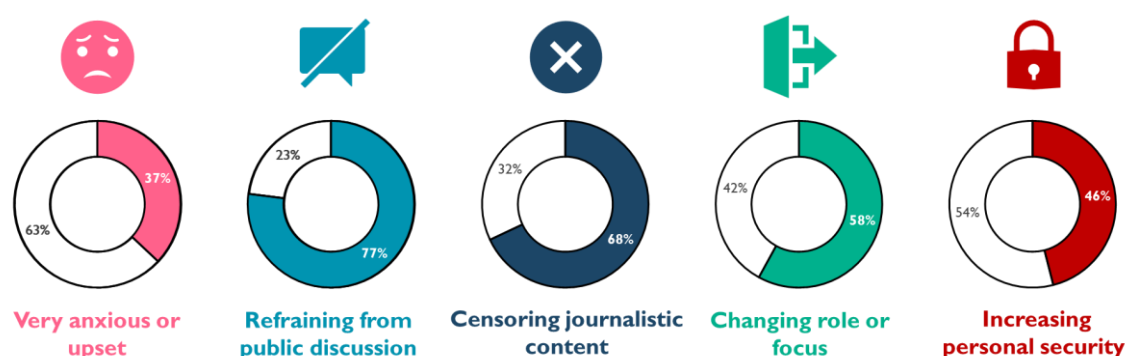
The scale and impact of abuse revealed by this research raises questions about how and where interventions could or should be made to reduce the overall impact of abuse on journalists and journalism.

The aim is to strike a balance so that journalists can do their jobs without fear or favour and are protected from abuse and threats to their safety, while ensuring that free speech is maintained, journalism can be challenged, and journalists can be held accountable for their work.

## Reducing the negative outcomes of abuse requires industry-wide prioritisation

Interventions designed to bring the sector closer to this balance are likely to need to consider the various consequences of abuse separately (see below), at least to begin with, so they can be prioritised and any potential trade-offs can be considered.

Figure 13. Frequency of experiencing impacts of ‘abuse’ in the previous 12 months reported by journalists responding to the survey.<sup>137 138 139 140 141</sup>



For example, it may be considered important to reduce the mental or emotional impact of abuse on journalists to bring down the proportion who report feeling very anxious or upset (above left chart). But in some cases, it may be difficult to reduce upset without compromising some of the other goals, such as ensuring that in a free, democratic society, journalism can be challenged.

These potential trade-offs might be experienced at an individual level and, more broadly, at a societal level.

<sup>137</sup> Very anxious or upset. Table 19: Q25 ‘As a result of any abuse, threats, or harassment you have experienced in the past 12 months as a result of your work as a journalist, to what extent have you felt any of the following emotions?’. Base: n=534. 37% selected at least one of the following options “anxious – a huge amount”, “anxious – quite a lot”, “upset – a huge amount”, “upset – quite a lot”.

<sup>138</sup> Refraining from public discussion. Table 19: Q23 ‘Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?’. Base: n=534. 77% selected “very often”, “quite often”, “sometimes” or “rarely” to at least one of the following statements “Decided not to publicly discuss certain topics (e.g. on social media)” and “Chosen not to promote journalistic work on social media”.

<sup>139</sup> Censoring journalistic content. Table 19: Q23 ‘Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?’. Base: n=534. 68% selected “very often”, “quite often”, “sometimes” or “rarely” to at least one of the following statements “Decided not to cover certain topics”, “Your editor decided you should not cover certain topics / stories”, “Changed your tone/style of reporting on a story (e.g. ‘toning down’”, “Had your work/reporting changed (by an editor) to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public”, “Had previously published work edited retrospectively in response to potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public”, and “Had outlets/employers refuse to publish certain work to avoid potential negative reactions from certain sections of the public”.

<sup>140</sup> Changing role or focus. Table 19: Q23 ‘Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?’. Base: n=534. 58% selected “very often”, “quite often”, “sometimes” or “rarely” to at least one of the following statements “Changed your role to be less publicly visible/exposed (e.g. less requirement to be on social media)”, “Changed the topic areas you cover”, “Changed which organisation(s) you work for”, and “Considered leaving journalism completely”.

<sup>141</sup> Increasing personal security. Table 19: Q23 ‘Over the past 12 months, how often do you feel you have done or experienced the following things?’. Base: n=534. 46% selected “very often”, “quite often”, “sometimes” or “rarely” to at least one of the following statements, “Avoided attending events or visiting spaces where you felt your safety would be at risk”, “Relocated yourself and/or your family”, “Avoided visiting certain geographical areas”, and “Put in place increased personal security measures (e.g. additional home security)”.

Being clear about priorities allows these potential trade-offs to be weighed up, and interventions can be designed that actively seek to take account of the overall picture and the balance that is being sought.

Addressing these adequately may require different interventions, with different trade-offs. In some cases tackling one outcome, or the cause of it, may directly contradict other aims. **Industry-wide agreement on what constitutes unacceptable abuse**, and what may be tolerable given other priorities, would help with weighing up potentially conflicting goals.

## There are opportunities to reduce the impact of abuse before and after it happens

In researching the experiences of journalists at scale via the survey and speaking to some journalists in considerable detail in the interviews, it becomes clear that abuse takes different forms, and that it can be useful to map these experiences over time. Journalists report both isolated incidents and the cumulative effects of ‘abuse’ over time. They may be more or less prepared to cope with abuse, and they may or may not benefit from support that is offered afterwards.

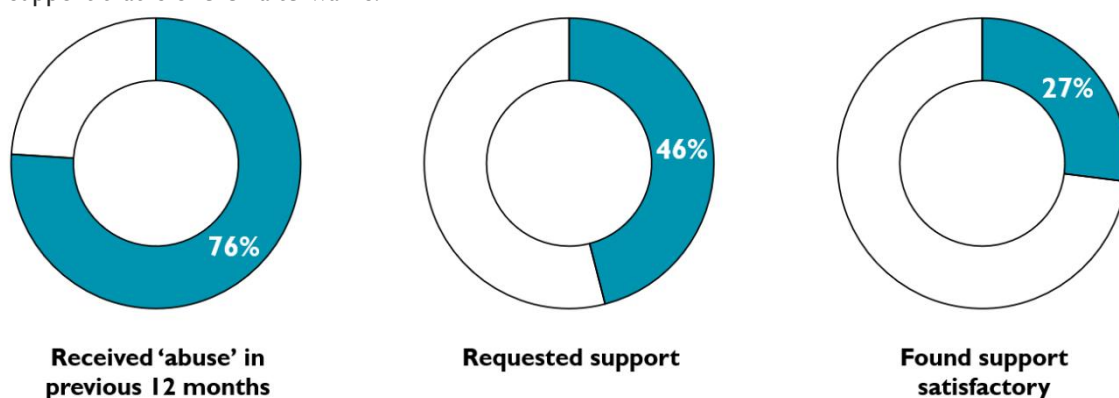


Figure 14. Percentages shown all of sample who reported experiencing abuse<sup>142 143 144</sup>

<sup>142</sup> Table 1: Q14 'Have any of these things happened to you as a direct result of your work as a journalist in the past 12 months?'. Base: n=534. 76% selected at least one of the options listed.

<sup>143</sup> Table 4: Q28 'In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?' Base: total sample, n=534. Of those who had experienced abuse (Q14), 46% requested at least one form of support.

<sup>144</sup> Table 8: Q30 'And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?' Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse). 27% satisfied with at least one form of support.



In this research, we have focused particularly on the support requested or received from employers, platforms and the police.

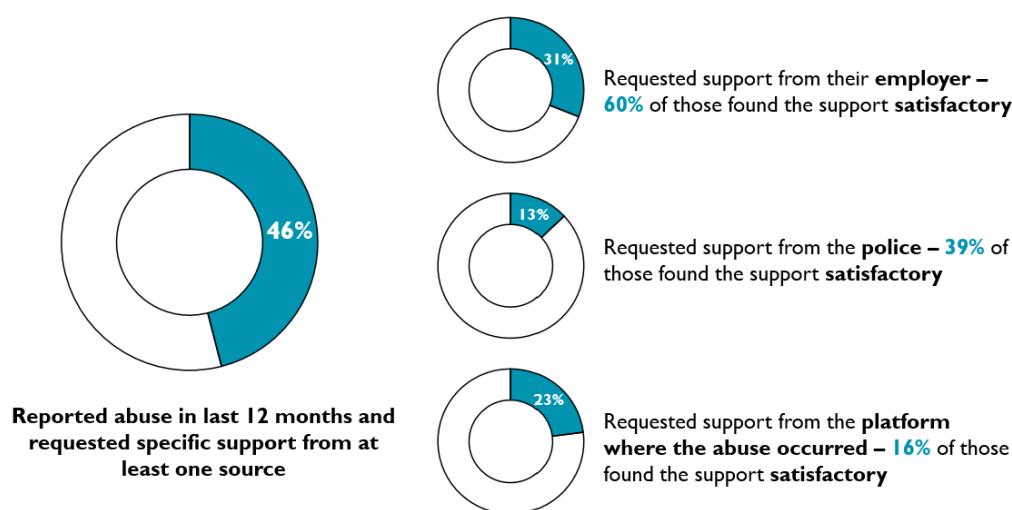


Figure 15. Percentages shown in pie charts all of those who have experienced abuse<sup>145 146 147 148</sup>

For each of the outcomes of abuse listed above that the industry wishes to prioritise, it is helpful to consider three areas where action can be taken to improve outcomes.

### 1) Prevention

With such a high proportion of journalists reporting ‘abuse’ of some kind in the previous 12 months, preventing abuse from occurring in the first place is an obvious route to reducing the overall scale of the problem.

As above, agreeing what constitutes abuse, or which types of abuse it is considered most important to reduce, will help focus efforts and design targeted interventions. For example, interventions that are highly effective at reducing the mental or emotional impact on journalists may be in direct tension with efforts to ensure content is not censored or limited.

There are opportunities for the industry to learn from experiences and share what is working well.

### 2) Awareness of and access to appropriate support

While many journalists reporting ‘abuse’ have sought support from employers, platforms and the police, many have not. This may be because the support isn’t available, or it may be because journalists aren’t aware of it. Improving access to appropriate support must be married with proactively increasing awareness of the support that is available.

<sup>145</sup> Table 4: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’ Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 46% requested at least one form of support.

<sup>146</sup> Tables 7+8: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’. Base: n=406. 31% requested support from their employer. Q30 ‘And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?’ Employer’ Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 60% “very satisfied” or “quite satisfied” with the support of their employer.

<sup>147</sup> Tables 7+8+39: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’. Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse). 13% requested support from the police. Q30 ‘And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?’ Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 39% “very satisfied or quite satisfied” with the support of the police.

<sup>148</sup> Tables 7+8+39: Q28 ‘In the past 12 months, have you requested specific support from any of the following organisations in relation to abuse, threats or violence you have experienced or could experience as a direct result of your work as a journalist?’. Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse). 23% requested support from the platform the abuse occurred. Q30 ‘And were you satisfied with the support you received from the organisations you approached?’ Platform where the abuse occurred’ Base: n=406 (have experienced abuse) 16% “very satisfied” or quite satisfied” with the support from the platform where the abuse occurred.

This research has revealed that there is little to no consensus on what such support is supposed to achieve, making it unclear to journalists when and how institutions can step in to attempt to reduce the negative consequences of receiving 'abuse'. There are opportunities here for employers and for the industry to build on existing collaboration and work together more to share what is working well, promote industry-wide initiatives and be clearer what all initiatives are intended to achieve. This could include organisations that train journalists, and membership organisations and other bodies that support them. It would also be beneficial if these discussions explicitly considered who should be responsible for supporting freelance journalists.

### **3) Effectiveness of the support that is available**

If the support available is more effective and provides journalists with more consistent results in terms of resolving challenges and ensuring they feel safe and able to conduct their work, this could go a long way to mitigating some of the negative consequences of abuse.

Being clear what initiatives and support are intended to achieve makes it easier for the industry to practically assess what is working well, share evaluations and make changes over time.

With different outcomes to be addressed or mitigated, and different points in people's experience of abuse and harassment at which to intervene, there are multiple opportunities for policy and interventions to make a tangible difference. In each case, consensus will be required to make the most of these opportunities as they will likely require collaboration and consistency from actors involved – government, the media sector, tech platforms, police and the justice system, and journalists themselves.