

**Twitter: An opportunity or a curse for South African female journalists?**

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GMBEMI001

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## **COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed and cited and referenced. This essay served as the foundation and a critical reflection for the short film *Section 16*, which is also submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of MASTER OF ARTS: DOCUMENTARY ARTS.

**Signature:**

Signed by candidate

EMILIE MADELEINE GAMBADE

**Date:** 06 FEBRUARY 2022

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Any opinion, finding and conclusion or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the author and *Daily Maverick* does not accept any liability in this regard.

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## ABSTRACT

The spread of cyberviolence around the globe and cyberbullying towards female journalists is growing (Mijatović, 2016); in fact, thanks to improved technology and the proliferation of bots and botnets (Barojan, 2018), it is becoming even more ubiquitous. The cruelty and frequency of the attacks prompted UN Secretary-General António Guterres to declare in March 2021: “There should be no room for misogyny and violence in journalism. Social media platforms and governments must protect women journalists from online violence” (Posetti et al, 2021.) However, social media companies, government bodies and regulators have done little to curb the toxicity of the discourse often held on social media platforms, the violence of attacks and cyberviolence in general. In South Africa, Twitter had “9.3 million users in 2021 ... up 4% from 2020” (Staff Writer, BusinessTech, 2021.) However, the number of intimidations and threats towards female journalists also increased, especially on Twitter (Quintal, 2019). This essay serves as research material for the short film ‘Section 16’, which is also submitted for the completion of a Master’s degree in Documentary Arts. It features interviews with selected female journalists working at *Daily Maverick*, who through personal accounts and specific experiences describe why they use Twitter, even though they are or might be subject to online violence (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) They understand the dilemma many journalists face in today’s connected world: on the one hand, Twitter provides leads to stories, work opportunities and global news alerts (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021); on the other hand, it also puts the user at risk of emotional abuse, ‘loneliness and possible trauma’ (Daniels & Lowe Morna, 2018.) This dissertation also studies, as a foundation for the film ‘Section 16’, the extent and frequency of usage, the type of content shared and the level of engagement, and explores the impact of Twitter, from the time they started using the platform to the present day, and the feelings and emotions using the platform sparks. Findings show that “the hate machine” (Simon, 2021) and online violence directly influence and curb journalists’ interactivity on the platform, even if only a little, as usage becomes more carefully controlled and at times constrained; the bigger a journalist’s Twitter following, the more important the platform is within and for their work – regardless of the emotional toll that using the platform has on them (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) Furthermore, an experienced journalist I spoke to who worked in a newsroom during apartheid explained that

they found social media violence not dissimilar to what they experienced in the years leading to the release of Nelson Mandela and the first democratic national elections on 27 April 1994 (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) This research and the findings helped considerably in further developing interview questions, structuring the storyline of the film ‘Section 16’, finding the arc of the film’s narrative and editing the final cut.

## INTRODUCTION

The literature about social media, the Twitter platform and its impact is expanding. In 2021, a team of researchers noted that online violence “has become the new frontline in journalism safety – and women journalists sit at the epicentre of risk” (Posetti et al, 2021). The rise of fake news, far-right extremism and populism, along with widespread campaigns of disinformation and the use of bots and botnets (Eslahi, Meisam et al, 2012) have increased the use of “harassment and threats against women journalists to undercut public trust in critical journalism and facts in general” (Posetti et al, 2021). Attacks targeting female journalists haven’t stopped or slowed down, but instead, have gained impetus, and Posetti et al. argue that, “Online violence against journalists is a significant feature of what we call ‘platform capture’, which involves the weaponization of social media by bad-faith actors, in combination with the structural failures of the platforms’ business models and product design, and the virtual entrapment of many news organisations and journalists into platform dependency” (2021.) In this dissertation, I am looking closely at the complex and layered relationship between female South African journalists and Twitter, and what patterns, if any, there could be in how they use the platform and the impact it has; I am also demonstrating how ubiquitous Twitter is in their work and how much control is required to not fall into ‘a rabbit hole’. In addition, I reveal how, despite recurring attacks and abuse, the journalists interviewed return to the platform, in some instances, in a more controlled and careful manner. As previously discussed, bullying and hate speech are nothing new. (Gambade, 2020.) The act of bullying can be “traced back to the 1530s” (Donegan, as quoted in Geri, 2019:18), although as mentioned by Selby: “human beings have always been fractious and quarrelsome” (2017:30); bullying can also be found in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Donegan, 2012), and hate speech can be found in “handwritten letters” or telephone conversations (Hagen Landsverk, 2016). Yet, the digital world has made threats and harassment “visible to all” (Hagen Landsverk, 2016), shining an even bleaker light on misogyny, bigotry and racism. A term was coined in 2018 by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), to express online bullying: “technology-facilitated gender-based violence”, also known as technology-facilitated GBV (Hinson et al, 2018.)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which, as part of its mission, “defends and promotes freedom of expression, media independence and pluralism”, recently released a report (Posetti et al, 2021) that looked specifically at the impact of online violence and disinformation on female journalists around the world, highlighting that cyberbullying, ‘networked misogyny’, ‘gaslighting’, online and offline threats have become a real concern in the protection of journalists. The research included “a global survey of 901 journalists from 125 countries conducted in five languages; long-form interviews with 173 international journalists, editors, and experts in the fields of freedom of expression, human rights law, and digital safety; two big data case studies assessing over 2.5 million posts on Facebook and Twitter directed at two prominent women journalists (Maria Ressa in the Philippines and Carole Cadwalladr in the UK) undertaken to validate the self-reporting of [the] interviewees and survey respondents with objective data; 15 detailed country case studies; and a literature review covering hundreds of scholarly and civil society research publications. A team of 24 international researchers from 16 countries contributed to the study.” The research showed that “73% of the survey respondents identifying as women said they had faced cyberbullying”, which included “threats of physical violence (identified by 25% of survey respondents), ... death threats, and sexual violence (identified by 18%)” (Posetti et al, 2021.) Yet, journalists’ use of the Twitter platform hasn’t dwindled. Few journalists have been tempted to change usage habits or quit the platform entirely (Elizabeth, 2017), but most keep using the platform, regardless of the negative impact it may have on their life and work (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) One of the reasons might be the perception that a considerable number of Twitter users get their news from the platform and that journalists thus ‘need’ to be there, both to find out what is happening in real-time (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021) and to share the news as it happens (Luque, 2019.) This is partly true: for example, Walker and Matsa showed that although 23% of adults in the US use Twitter, “more than half of those users (55%) get news on the site regularly” (2021.)

For the purpose of the film ‘Section 16’ and this essay, on which the film is based, I decided to only focus on selected South African investigative female journalists who, at the time of writing, all worked at *Daily Maverick*. Some of the answers used in this research come from interviews conducted for ‘Section 16’, a short documentary exploring cyberviolence experienced by female

journalists in South Africa. The journalists selected, all women, are of different backgrounds, ages and race, and are based in Johannesburg, Cape Town and New York. An interview with an outside expert on the protection of journalism was also conducted to get more perspective and context on the global situation and possible solutions to the issue of cyberviolence. Interviews were conducted online – survey questions were sent via email – as well as recorded in person, while filming for ‘Section 16’.

Participants were informed that the interviews were being taped and were given the context and the reasons for the interviews. Each of the participants agreed to the recording as well as to be named in the research, although for the purpose of the research, participants, especially those who were not filmed, will remain anonymous. Most of the participants who were interviewed had already voiced their concern and frustration about cyberbullying and had shared the threats they were subjected to. Some had written about the topic on *Daily Maverick* (Haffajee, 2019.) They were enthusiastic about being able to share their experience. The email interviews were constructed around twenty-three questions, ranging from Twitter usage (frequency, what does the interviewee do on the platform, how personal is the content shared, etc.) to their opinion about Twitter usage in relation to journalism, and its impact on work and mental wellness. As noted in the UCT ethics form, the interviewees understood the implications of the interviews and the intended distribution, including potential consequences of online distribution of the film. The participants are journalists who have taken part in videos and filming in the past and are aware of their image being on the internet; the interviewees were all interested in taking part in the making of the short film in the hope of creating more awareness around the issue of online violence.

The participants and I work in the same organisation – *Daily Maverick*. Before starting the film and the essay, I thus informed the founder and editor-in-chief of *Daily Maverick* about the topic of the documentary and the essay.

Although the essay and the film are not revealing something new but rather highlighting a topical problem, and although most of the information, including tweets and court papers, is in the public domain, some findings are informative. For example, a few interviewees who started to work in the journalism field during the violent apartheid era up to the first democratic elections

in 1994 often faced vicious intimidation for doing their job, including arrests, personal threats, censorship and jail time (Anonymous, personal communication, November 2021), giving them a frame of reference with which to compare today's online violence. Most of the journalists interviewed agree that cyberviolence is "part of the job" (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) Nonetheless, they hope that solutions will be found to prevent and stop the threats. While the journalists interviewed for this paper use Twitter to promote their work, reach out to sources, find stories, engage with their audience directly and comment on the news, interactivity with the platform remains carefully controlled and limited (Littau & Jahng, 2021.) To some degree, the platform acts like 'an abusive partner' – a relationship that is at once useful and destructive; it also triggers a deeper reaction, a fight mode, anchored in journalism's ethics and values: the journalists need to defend truth (*Daily Maverick*, 2019) and "hold the moral ground" (Anonymous, personal communication, April 2021), including on social media.

I understand that the limitations of this methodology include the possibility of the journalists' subjectivity (Bosch, 2016) and how interviewer and interviewee influenced each other. Still, as explained earlier, this dissertation demonstrates the complex relationship between female South African journalists and Twitter, looking at possible patterns in usage and impact; it also shows that, despite recurring attacks and abuse, the journalists interviewed still use the platform. None of the interviewees denied the power of the Twitter platform and how it permeates the world of journalism in ways that are not rescindable.

## CHAPTER 1: JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

**“The tensions in newsrooms over reporters’ social media presence are not just about politics.” (Smith, 2021)**

The rise of social networks transformed even further a media industry that had already been affected by the internet and the world wide web (Kaplan, 2015). The ability to share information non-stop and anonymously, the option to search, publish and promote any content created, to contact and communicate with one another, to entertain, to market or amplify the news, grew so rapidly that it gave little time for users and media players to gain a perspective and understand the multitude of consequences such powerful communication tools could have on their work and industry (Safari, 2018).

Today, journalists who use social media platforms do so to follow what is trending, to keep ‘their finger on the pulse’, to search for topics, to see what people are saying (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021) and create stories around this, to respond to the needs and wants of readers, and hopefully, anticipate them as well. This has led to positive initiatives such as ‘personalised journalism’ (Safari, 2018), citizen journalism and collaborative news (Safari, 2018). In addition, for investigative journalists, social media platforms can be helpful in gathering information (Safari, 2018) and facilitating access to sources and information about subjects investigated (Gearing, 2014). They can also allow investigative journalists from around the world to collaborate (Amanda, 2014). Yet, it seems that although social media is used to gather and share sensitive information, journalists still prefer more traditional ways of investigating and reporting on a story than using the more public and less secure social media networks (Abdenour, 2016).

Another significant development in the media industry associated with the rise of social media and its interconnectivity with journalism is the increased spread of fake news and conspiracy theories, with online voices – real and bogus – now broadcasting relentlessly in a continual cacophony of opinions, statements, ideas, news and commentary (Harper, 2010). News organisations haven’t yet found quick and effective ways to combat the spread of fake news

(Ahmad, 2010) or online abuse; in addition, CEOs and leaders of social media platforms have been unwilling to properly address issues of hate speech and fake news on their platforms (Yaraghi, 2019), often falling back on the rights assumed by freedom of speech and a general consensus that basic human decency will prevail or that users would help to improve the platform (Shevat and Penn, 2021). In November 2021, Twitter launched ‘the new Twitter Developer Platform’, saying: “We want you – our developer community – to drive the future of innovation on Twitter. We want to see developers create more solutions that improve the health and safety of the public conversation...” (Shevat and Penn, 2021). On their side, journalists believe they need to “hold the moral ground” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 2021).

In consequence, social networks as a tool for journalists have not been – as had been thought in the past – a “net positive” (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018); they are also not always considered a provider of truth and have led to the public losing trust in the media (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018). The Edelman Trust Barometer (Corruption Watch, 2018) found that trust in the media remained low around the world. In South Africa, it reached only 40% of confidence, “a drop of one point from last year” (2018). Digging further into the report, Corruption Watch found that “traditional media and search engines remain the most highly trusted media channels, with social media unsurprisingly faring poorly” (2018).

### **Cyber Misogyny**

**“There should be no room for misogyny and violence in journalism. Social media platforms and governments must protect women journalists from online violence.” (Guterres, 2021)**

Joel Simon, Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, argued that: “Journalists who engage in critical reporting [found] that harassment has become part of the landscape; but female journalists confront a different level, at a different intensity of harassment that’s highly gendered and sexualised... and women tell us that it has become unbearable, and this is happening on a global level.” (Simon, personal communication, October 2021). In addition, Daniels and Nyamweda note that “a new threat against women has also emerged in the form of the cyber misogyny that includes some of the ugliest forms of sexism being used to try [to]

silence media women” (2019), while Hagen Landsverk (2016) emphasises that misogyny was always an issue, but moved from being private to being loudly and freely expressed in the public sphere, or as one journalist called it – in reference to Twitter – the “public square” (Anonymous, personal communication, 30 June 2020).

In South Africa, the violence of online attacks against female journalists also increased around the Gupta Leaks (*Daily Maverick* et al, 2017) and the now-defunct UK PR firm Bell Pottinger’s “‘deflection’ campaign using social media” (Thamm, 2017). It was reported that “using a series of underhanded tactics, Bell Pottinger have sought to divert the public outcry over the Guptas and refocus the attention upon other examples of state interference and capture, notably by ‘white capital’” (Thamm, 2017). These techniques, the use of armies of trolls and bots to roll out attacks and threats aimed at single individuals, were efficient in intimidating journalists in the hope that they would eventually drop their investigations. Jalonen et al have written extensively on the emergence of trolls and bots (2016), a specific interaction, “which can be found in almost every discussion that includes emotionally appealing topics. Trolling is a useful tool for any organisation willing to force a discussion off-track when one has no proper facts to back one’s arguments” (2016).

## **CHAPTER 2: SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE JOURNALISTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: WHAT FOR?**

**“I muted (him) on Twitter because the deluge of responses was too abusive to cope with, but it had real-life consequences.” (Haffajee, 6 August 2019)**

The journalists interviewed gave both unique and similar reasons as to why they originally joined social media networks. There were also clear distinctions between platforms used for personal reasons (mainly Instagram and Facebook) – which are often kept private or separate from their work – and Twitter, which is used by all participants mainly for ‘professional’ reasons.

(Anonymous, personal communication, 2020.)

One respondent explained that she joined Twitter hoping to find work opportunities, and that the platform had provided her with her first freelance opportunity. “I was looking for an employer. I was looking to be recognised. And I’ve gotten job opportunities through Twitter, my very first real writing gigs... And an editor... reached out to me in 2012 via Twitter, to say, can I please write columns for them once a week? and they would pay me, and that was fantastic. I had gotten others when I was doing freelancing. I got a lot of opportunities through Twitter. So, that was fantastic. And I would workshop the work that I’d done, the videos, the interviews that I’d done, and I would put it on social media in an effort to be attracted or to attract a good employer.”

(Anonymous, personal communication, 25 June 2020.)

Research has shown that Twitter is used by journalists and news titles to explore and market stories; it complements and amplifies the role of journalists, at times even allowing them to tweet sensible information about events and news when they happen (Ahmad, 2010). Gearing, back in 2014, predicted the interconnections between investigative journalism, mainstream media and social media platforms. She noted that “connectivity with news sources” is essential to the researching, investigating and developing of a story and therefore social media networks could expand the opportunity to connect with sources and go deeper into issues. The journalists interviewed concurred, and although they all agree that social networks – especially Twitter –

should not replace ‘real-life’, on-the-ground journalism, it did and does help to get ‘into a story’. One interviewee noted (Gambade, 2020):

“You got a lot of stories from Twitter. People would DM you, sources that are still sources today would reach out via that platform; you would become friends with people that you’d met via Twitter that helped you in journalism, in different ways. I’ve met video journalists with whom later on we worked together on projects via Twitter... Then, also just cultivating relationships with newsmakers, that was a very, very important use of that network; let alone getting your work out there for the people to read and for people to share. Those were the main reasons why I used Twitter as a tool for my journalism. Initially, at least.” (Anonymous, personal communication, 25 June 2020.)

Another respondent explained that peer pressure among journalists to join Twitter and get followers on social media was real; she added that she felt ‘lucky’ that when she was hired as a reporter, fresh out of varsity, and walked into the newsroom, she didn’t have a “fancy phone” (Anonymous, personal communication, June 2021). Still, she felt compelled to be on social media. She explained: “As a younger journalist I was encouraged to tweet and felt pressure to have many more followers, like certain senior journos covering massive national court cases etc. Even working on the editing side of things, as a deputy news editor just a few years ago, that pressure still existed and I could tell that reporters were keen to up their Twitter followings, but not necessarily the way they, or on what, they were reporting.” (Anonymous, personal communication, June 2021.) The journalist described how back in 2010, when she joined the platform, Twitter was believed to be an extraordinary tool to help gather and spread news, and young journalists were often asked to build a Twitter profile and grow their followers (Anonymous, personal communication, June 2021).

In retrospect, knowing what we know now about online violence and bullying, she also noted how poorly trained young journalists were, and still are, to deal with the potential pitfalls, backlashes and violence that come with developing a profile on social media – along with opportunities (Anonymous, personal communication, June 2021). The lack of in-house training and preparation on how to deal with social media’s potential impact on one’s social, mental and

professional life was a common concern of the respondents, a topic which we will explore further.

The same respondent explained: “I use Twitter to monitor audience reactions and engagement to my stories and my articles and to investigate stories and conduct research.” (Anonymous, personal communication, June 2021.) The other journalists interviewed had a similar approach – Twitter usage is, for most, controlled, with an awareness of time spent on the platform and the emotional responses it creates; it is used within the parameters of an investigation, for the promotion of work (publication of a book, a new investigation or a new story), live reporting, retweets and more importantly, to check what is trending.

None of the interviewees said that they shared personal or intimate information on the Twitter platform (when they do, as mentioned previously, for example on Instagram, their profile is kept private). One respondent added that she sometimes uses Twitter to post “random images of [her] paintings” that have nothing to do with her work and do not specifically say anything about herself or reveal anything about her life (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021).

Even though usage of the platform is still frequent – as we will show later – McGregor and Molyneux have pointed out that journalists might have been giving too much attention to social media, and Twitter in particular (2020), an attitude that could have negative consequences: a toll on mental wellbeing, lack of focus, loss of confidence, Twitter ‘storms’ and more. Interestingly, Littau and Jahng noted that, “Journalists with more personal and professional details on Twitter profiles were more likely to be highly interactive, a relationship that predicts higher perceptions of credibility based on past research.” (2021.)

More engagement and more personal interactions with other users and followers help to grow one’s profile – but this is a double-edged sword as increased engagement and personal interactions also lead to more attention and a greater risk of attracting bots, botnets and trolls, as well as of becoming ‘addicted’ to the platform. This could be a warning sign of the abusive element that stains the relationship between journalists and Twitter. While, on one side, journalists should avoid sharing personal information to protect their privacy and deter online

attackers, bots and trolls from targeting their private life, families and friends, and “ought to keep their opinions to themselves to avoid being seen as biased” (Smith, 2021), Twitter’s algorithms encourage the sharing of personal details and opinions as proof of credibility and for more authentic interaction and “greater engagement” (Meserole, 2018). Consequently, journalists – and newsrooms – face what looks like a dumbfounding challenge: the more one shares, the more one’s opportunity to grow their following increases, the more opportunities for engagement, the greater the risks to be attacked or included in controversy, the greater the chances to be affected professionally and mentally – in this interaction loop, reward and punishment go hand in hand with what look like, as we will see later, signs that are commonly found in abusive relationships.

Talking about awareness, the respondents often referred to a rising suspicion about the effectiveness of the social media platforms, especially Twitter: this is mainly due to diminishing trust in its news and information accuracy; the rise of trolls and bots, and large campaigns of disinformation (Fraser, 2017) that led to today’s toxic environment have overshadowed the initial benefits of the Twitter network: fast sharing of news (Kwak et al, 2010). This could be another warning sign of the abusive side of the relationship with Twitter, as journalists feel it is their duty to act as ‘defenders of truth’, when the platform itself is failing at fighting disinformation and lies (Fowler, 2020); they ‘go in’ and through tweets, statements and stories hope to shape a better and more constructive narrative. In doing so, journalists seem ‘trapped’: they need to know what is happening and whom to defend when lies are spread because, as one respondent said: “If not me, then who?” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 2021); they must engage with users and fellow journalists, the powers-that-be and politicians, restore trust and establish facts so people can know the truth, and thus, they cannot leave the platform.

#### **a. Frequency of Usage: No Specific Pattern**

Responses from the journalists interviewed showed that there was no specific pattern in the frequency with which they used the Twitter platform – although almost all checked Twitter at least once a day. One respondent explained, “I check in the morning in case there’s something newsy or something linked to what I’m looking into... And then during the day I’ll check things, sometimes getting distracted, but not for too long.” (Anonymous, personal communication,

August 2021.) Another journalist noted that she checked Twitter daily and felt like she sometimes spent “too much time on it”, while a third respondent checked the platform only a few times a week, randomly (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021).

Most interviewees “simply scroll” through their feed; a few noted that they “report on live events and engage with followers”; others used the platform to share tweets. One respondent acknowledged that: “I sometimes check it and then fall into a ‘rabbit hole’. This happens sometimes, but also in a good way in that it leads me to a theme/story. I spend too much time on the platform.” (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

It was clear though, after a deeper analysis of each of the journalist’s feeds, that threats and attacks are more prominent on the accounts of journalists who have a greater number of followers – more than 5,000 – use Twitter often, and actively engage with it – even in a controlled manner. Journalists who only occasionally or rarely checked the platform barely had any threats. “Ultimately, while Twitter is often heralded as a major asset for journalists and news organizations, it is most relevant to those who use it often.” (Houston et al, 2018.) Vyse noted in 2017 that even though Twitter is “a professional tool for following breaking news, sharing insights, finding story ideas, and promoting work... it’s also more than that. Twitter is a social environment unto itself, one in which reporters often spend more time than in actual, real-world social environments (and even then, they’re still on Twitter). ‘If Twitter went away,’ *Daily Beast* senior editor Erin Gloria Ryan told [Vyse], ‘at first it would feel like a phantom limb.’” (2017).

#### **b. Being on Twitter: “It’s Part of the Job”**

Two journalists interviewed made a parallel between violence on social media and violence towards journalists as experienced during apartheid. One interviewee noted: “I have been working as a journalist since 1982... My experience is that there’s always been platforms of propaganda, that apartheid itself was entirely based on fake news, which was faked towards an entire generation of white people – communist threats... Nelson Mandela was a terrorist... and in those circumstances the lives of journalists were threatened in different ways; and so, myself and black journalists were arrested for protesting or for being in a township... were physically

arrested... So, the onslaught on journalists in the apartheid years and the propaganda campaign was one... that was brought on, to a certain extent, by mainstream media... But for journalists that was an extremely difficult time.” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 2021.)

The interviewees explained that being a journalist in today’s South Africa is, for the most part, much safer and easier than it was in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. “I’ve worked as a journalist now in modern South Africa, for forty years, and I’ve never felt as free as I do today to write what I do. And I’ve never written... as consistently critically ever before,” one interviewee pointed out (Anonymous, personal communication, November 2021). This comparison, between reporting the news then and reporting the news now, is helpful to understand how older journalists might be more prepared or better equipped to deal with online attacks and threats, simply because of their earlier experience with violence.

For them, threats are often feared when they happen in “real” life and not in a “liminal” space, as one journalist called Twitter. “Myself and Twitter... because it’s a liminal space, I use it to voyeur a certain kind of interaction... Twitter in a sense strips people of their masks, it’s a particular platform that invites not even debate but hatred, and it’s ugly... it’s like walking into one of those fight clubs... So I watch it, I try not to engage, I see what people are saying, I monitor it, I watch it for my own edification... I view social media as a window into the world. I view social media completely differently to younger journalists... the same way I would sit in a café and eavesdrop on a conversation and perhaps get a tip-off of a big bank heist. So, I watch Twitter a lot, see what’s happening, where the bots go, what they do...” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 2021). All the respondents expressed concern at how journalists are targeted and felt there was a need for an effective response to stop the spread of violence against them.

In addition, a few interviewees noted that their personal experience was that, should someone threaten to kill them, “it probably means that the person is not going to act on it” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 2021) – what happens on Twitter and other social networks stays ‘there’. Some of the respondents said that although they had been offered bodyguards and private security by their editors, they often preferred to be left alone (Anonymous, personal

communication, August 2021). Yet, this resilience does not mean there are no mental and, at times, physical, consequences. As one of the respondents noted:

“I think all of us either have some collateral damage somewhere or we become resilient. I think if you have any unresolved issues in yourself it could destroy you; a lot of people became alcoholics, a lot of people drink too much to numb it, you know? Because you can’t predict when the thoughts will come back or when you are going to remember to be triggered... We all develop our carapace... We’ve dealt with it for years. We know that this is the way it is. This is the terrain. You know, if you’re a cop and you go out to a robbery, you know you might get shot. Yeah, it’s your job.” (Anonymous, personal communication, 24 June 2020.)

When asked what they feared most about using Twitter, the interviewees unanimously responded that they feared being attacked and being harassed; two journalists added that they feared being cancelled; in addition, the most cited concern was that something said or shared would spark controversy, or that a user – or many users – would damage their reputation. All the interviewees had experienced offensive comments and personal threats; some had had defamation campaigns rolled out against them, trying to damage their reputation; two had been on the receiving end of vulgar, sexist and misogynistic comments.

Yet, when asked if they would leave the platform entirely, the consensus was that this was impossible as Twitter is now intrinsically attached to and a part of their work. One respondent explained that she was afraid to miss out on important conversations, “especially if [they are] relevant to the work I’m doing”. (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

Interestingly, she added that this was even more valid during the pandemic. She noted: “It’s good for me, especially under lockdown when I’m not exposed to as many people like pre-Covid when I moved about much more, to try and get a sense of what people think about certain issues.” (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

Even though leaving the platform doesn’t seem like a possible choice, tweaking one’s engagement with it and controlling one’s exposure to it is a path that most have followed. One respondent explained: “After five years or so of constant daily use, I quit Twitter in 2016.

Primarily, I was concerned about how it was encroaching into my life, but I was equally worried about its effects on my mental health. Comments from strangers could send me spiralling into self-doubt. Ironically, Twitter *REALLY* helped build my public profile – when I live-tweeted the Oscar Pistorius trial. So, I suppose I am grateful for that.” (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

The interviewee added that she thought that “being able to leave Twitter is in itself a mark of privilege”. She explained: “I was able to leave because I already had an established career and following. My partner, who is a woman of colour and less established in the media, says that she cannot leave Twitter because it is the portal to too many work opportunities for her. I recognise that particularly perhaps for people of colour, Twitter offers a platform – particularly for unvarnished political opinion – that may not be readily available elsewhere, and an opportunity to build one’s name without going through the gatekeeping of traditional media.” (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

A first assumption, thus, would be that the Twitter platform can be an ‘entrapment’ for journalists: they need it and are needed on it while, at times, paying a high price for being on it. Smith reported that a freelance editor at *The Times*, Lauren Wolfe, who had crossed “a hazy line” and shared personal opinions on Twitter which were not in line with the editorial direction of her employer, “was recently fired”. (2021)

One journalist explained that she didn’t “like Twitter any more”, adding: “But I cannot leave the platform because I feel it is part of my job... Yes... I maintain an account although I rarely use the platform and do not tweet and I consider the threats and offences a part of the job.”

Other respondents echoed her sentiment, adding that they, too, considered online threats and offences as “part of the job”. One interviewee reflected: “I got it more face to face before Twitter, to be honest – and I see the platform as just another tool.” (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

McGregor and Molyneux argued that they pondered a decade ago the idea that “these new-fangled social media sites will be our partners, driving traffic, revenue, and transparency, helping

us save journalism. Lately, though, we wonder if social media isn't killing journalism instead... This switch from relief effort to incursion is, of course, not a story about social media companies – which after all have always been in it for the money. It's about journalists and their unstudied approach to the platforms. Journalists saw Twitter simply as content, sprinkling it throughout their work without considering what that means for their own authority, despite the fact that the use of social media in stories may further undermine public trust in the news. The question isn't about social media being friend or foe, but whether we're watching journalism's suicide by a thousand tweets." (2020.) Twitter and other social media platforms are indeed a "part of the job" – but with what consequences on the said job and at what cost to the person performing it?

### CHAPTER 3: TWITTER AND JOURNALISTS – COURAGE AGAINST THE ABUSE

**“There were threats to mutilate my genitals, threats to slit my throat, to bomb my house, to pistol-whip me and burn me alive. I was told I would have poles shoved up my vagina, dicks shoved down my throat. I was told I would be begging to die, as a man would ejaculate in my eyeballs. And then they started posting an address linked to me around the Internet. I felt hunted. I felt terrified.” (Criado-Perez, 2016)**

The Office on Women’s Health (OASH) defines emotional abuse as “insults and attempts to scare, isolate, or control you” (Basile et al, 2018) which may have long-lasting effects that “are just as serious as the effects of physical abuse”. Emotional abuse is also defined, by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), as “a pattern of obsessive behaviour which is repeated, intrusive and causes fear of violence in the life and mind of the victim”. Bots, which are automated social media accounts mainly run by algorithms, “are programmed to use the same pattern of speech. If you come across several accounts using the exact same pattern of speech, for example tweeting out news articles using the headline as the text of the tweet, it is likely these accounts are run by the same algorithm.” (Barojan, 2018.) As such, bots and trolls can create patterns of ‘obsessive behaviour’ which cause fear of violence in the life and mind of the person targeted.

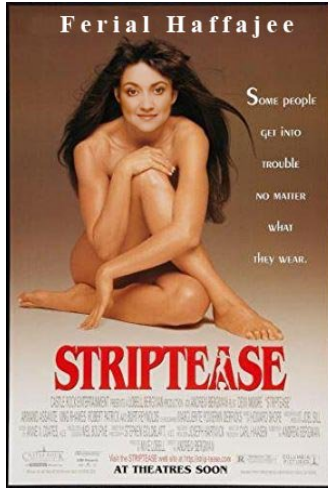
Furthermore, Basile et al writing for the OASH (2018) warns that shame or guilt, or feeling constantly afraid, powerless, as well as “hopeless, manipulated, used, and controlled and unwanted” could be signs of abuse – even though the abuse is not coming from one single person but, instead, from a platform and its many users, including bots.

During the process of filming, one participant, former editor of *City Press*, former editor of *Mail & Guardian* and associate editor of *Daily Maverick*, Ferial Haffajee, explained that when she first reported on ‘State Capture’ and published important investigative stories on the topic, she soon became the recipient of a stream of abusive tweets (Haffajee, personal communication, August 2021).

The tweets were often repetitive messages, using similar hashtags and claims, as well as fake and Photoshopped images of her in vulgar, misogynistic and offensive positions (Haffajee, 2019). In an article for *Daily Maverick*, she said: “One day after publishing an essay that took me months to report and which had been done with due care and consideration, I opened my feed to find distorted images of myself as a gargoyle and a mad elf starting back at me. ‘What the fuck,’ I thought and scrolled, alarmed at the images of myself jumping out at me.”

**Examples of offensive and misogynistic tweets tagging @ferialhaffajee, after her essay on ‘State Capture’, (Haffajee, 2019).** The senders’ accounts often seemed to have been created at the end of 2016, driven by the now-defunct UK-based PR firm Bell Pottinger (Haffajee, 2019).





Eskom Hld SOC Ltd follows



**Fikile Samuel** @fikile\_samuel · 2017/01/18

Did Rupert gave u these documents in your below meeting?

@HuffingtonPost @HuffPostSA

@HuffPostUK @Mngxitama

@ferialhaffajee

#Presstitutes



3

175

4



**Fikile Samuel** @fikile\_samuel · 2016/12/07



**Fikile Samuel** @fikile\_samuel · 2016/12/07

Who FUNDS writers like @ferialhaffajee to FOOL public with their bullshit.

Microwaving old stories #statecaputre.



**Fikile Samuel** @fikile\_samuel · 1h

Rupert milking @ferialhaffajee for spreading his agenda. She turns to write on rubbish #statecaputre report.



Mr Putin and 4 others

She explained that, at the time and for a long period afterwards, she felt an “extreme feeling of shame. You know it not to be true, but the manipulation is so conspicuous, or it has a purpose and that purpose works to make you feel ashamed... And my immediate concern was I have all this family, who is not very tech-savvy or sophisticated and I don’t want them to think that’s me in this guy’s bed, and on his lap or dancing in a chorus-girl line... I’m their daughter, and their sister and their niece... How am I going to explain this?” (Haffajee, personal communication, August 2021.) The smear campaign did “its work” (Haffajee, personal communication, August 2021): a presence on social media led to emotional impact, as well as fear, guilt and shame. Nonetheless, despite attacks and threats, many journalists do not leave the platform, even though they feel hurt by it. A reason could be that by leaving Twitter, the person ‘surrenders’ to the attacks, whereas by staying on the platform one can find and possibly fight against the users perpetrating the harassment, the person behind an offensive tweet, or the account posting an abusive comment (Hand, 2021). There is hope, in a sense, that staying on Twitter will help in fighting back – and as one interviewee mentioned, “protect” the public from possible harm and help those who are not able to fight back (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021).

This is a sentiment shared by journalist Pauli van Wyk who, in November 2018, following her investigation into the now-defunct South African bank VBS (Van Wyk, 2018), received a derogative tweet from the Member of Parliament and Commander-in-Chief of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Julius Malema.



The tweet, which said “You are sick, go to hell satan [sic]”, was retweeted more than 350 times, liked 1,500 times and unleashed a torrent of threats and attacks targeting Van Wyk directly. She remembers how at first she was confused by Malema’s tweet (Van Wyk, personal communication, April 2021). She also felt overwhelmed, disempowered and saddened by the number of tweets targeting her and the viciousness of the attacks. Nevertheless, Van Wyk, like Haffajee, stayed on the Twitter platform and kept her profile active. She felt that she had to “hold the higher moral ground” (Van Wyk, personal communication, April 2021).

The abuser is often not one single physical being one can complain against – abusers and cyberbullies might be algorithms, groups of bots (botnets) or anonymous individuals – making it more difficult to condemn them or stop them from inciting violence. In fact, a few respondents have, in the past, alerted Twitter about online abuse on the platform to no avail. They filed complaints against online abusers on Twitter and in one instance a group of journalists joined forces to file a lawsuit against Malema (South Africa: Equality Court, 2019); but suing someone or a platform for cyberbullying is complex, as the scale and the number of users on Twitter, real or fake, is massive, and the phenomenon is still fairly new to users, regulators and legislators. In South Africa, the Cybercrimes Act 19 of 2020 (*Government Gazette*, Act No. 19 of 2020: Cybercrimes Act, 2020) which was enacted as a law on 26 May 2021 and came into force on 1 December 2021, only includes “Eleven new ‘*cybercrimes*’ [which] have been defined in terms of

the Cybercrimes Act, including unlawful interception of data, unlawful acquisition, possession, provision, receipt or use of passwords, access codes or similar data or devices, cyber fraud and cyber extortion.” (Bhagattjee and Pillay, 2021). As argued by Snail ka Mtuze and Tilley (2021), the act, although an important step forward, does not cover cyberbullying and is, therefore, insufficient to protect journalists and the public against this.

## **CHAPTER 4: REGULATION, POLICY REFORMS, LEGISLATIVE RESPONSE: IS ANYONE DOING ANYTHING?**

**“In a federal courtroom in lower Manhattan, Robert Lemke, a California man and devoted Donald Trump supporter, was sentenced to three years in prison after pleading guilty to sending threats to lawmakers and members of the media.” (Stelter, 2021)**

Asked if they felt that Twitter and other social media platforms were doing enough to protect female journalists against the onslaught they may face when engaging on the platform, interviewees almost unanimously responded that social media corporations were not doing enough and should be held accountable for the content published on their platforms, similarly to any other publishers around the globe.

One journalist summed up: “I don’t feel Twitter is protecting enough women journalists against online violence on its platform... I would like the platform to be more responsive against the violence perpetuated on Twitter and I would like law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to deal more effectively and appropriately with online violence against women journalists. I think there should be tangible consequences against offenders, and I think there should be tangible consequences against Twitter.” (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

In early 2021, social media platforms Facebook and Twitter took a stand and decided to ban former US President Donald J Trump (Twitter banning Trump permanently), after years of bullying, threats and insults spread on the platforms (Ghosh, 2021). Ghosh argues that: “The question of when and how it’s appropriate for private companies to ‘de-platform’ people – especially notable public figures like Trump – is not so obvious.” The de-platforming of abusive users, although an effective solution, does not seem a fair and objective option in the long term, and further discussions and research are necessary to define what, if any, solutions could be put in place to ensure a safer and healthier debate and conversation on social media.

In November 2021, Twitter launched “the new Twitter Developer Platform”, a tool that asked users to help improve the “health and safety” of the conversation held on the platform. Twitter

explained: “We want you – our developer community – to drive the future of innovation on Twitter. We want to see developers create more solutions that improve the health and safety of the public conversation...” (Shevat and Penn, 2021). Twitter recognises the need to regulate or control the conversation on social media for more safety. But one could argue that a private company asking for a ‘service’ from its users, without compensating them for such a service is questionable. Why should the responsibility for a better, healthier conversation held on the platform of a private, for-profit company be carried out by individuals? Nonetheless, in September 2021, the social media company created a ‘safety mode’ to help with the issue of cyberbullying (Reuters, 2021).



Within newsrooms, protecting journalists from cyberviolence and harassment is complicated. ‘The Chilling’, UNESCO 2021 Research Discussion Paper stated that, “Media employers have made some progress in addressing gendered online violence against their journalists (primarily within the comments sections of their websites), but the journalism safety threats posed in the networked social media environment, and the risks intersecting with disinformation and political extremism (particularly on the far right), appear to be either poorly understood or too overwhelming to manage in many cases. Increasingly, and very problematically, employers respond to the problem by policing journalists’ speech (e.g., by introducing social media policies that discourage them from engaging in public commentary on ‘controversial issues’) and victim blaming (e.g., by suggesting a woman’s speech triggered an attack, or punishing them for the brand exposure caused by an attack). Women journalists are both the primary targets of online

violence and the first responders to it. Simultaneously, social media companies, news organisations and States are struggling to respond effectively to online violence against women journalists. This highlights the urgent need for policy reform, and novel legal, legislative and normative responses, in full compliance with international freedom of expression and privacy standards, from key stakeholders – in particular, UNESCO Member States.” (Posetti et al, 2021.)

What such policy reforms and “novel legal, legislative and normative responses” (Posetti et al, 2021) would look like is yet to be clarified. Following the testimony of whistle-blower Frances Haugen, who presented damning evidence against Facebook in front of the United States Congress in October 2021, talks about regulating social media platforms emerged. Haugen herself proposed one option “for making social media less harmful, [which] would be to create a dedicated regulatory agency to oversee companies like Facebook, which could have former tech workers on staff”. (Culliford, 2021.) She asked for the amendment of Section 230 of the US Constitution, which would grant companies immunity from liability “only if they follow best practices”.

Yet, Simon argues that regulatory bodies, especially if chosen or created by governments, could be problematic, considering that in many countries governments are using social media and the “hate machine” to spread propaganda, threaten or silence dissident voices and control a tool that can serve as an effective instrument to gain power and instil fear in opponents (Simon, personal communication, October 2021).

Another respondent’s view was that the platforms will eventually self-regulate. She explained that we are, at the moment, in a period of testing and trying, where everything is new and we have to go through periods of frictions and “push and pull” to determine what would be the best solution to soften the anger or, at least, turn the noise down into a healthier conversation. (Anonymous, personal communication, November 2021.)

Journalists have diverse opinions on how editors and newsrooms should react to prevent cyberbullying on social media. One journalist pointed out: “Increasingly, though, I do not understand why editors encourage journalists to live-tweet – as they are effectively publishing

their news on a rival site. Twitter is now a rival news site, and I don't understand why so many journalists are happy to give away scoops for free on it." (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.)

Another journalist added: "We should start thinking about it and say: At what point do we tell journalists 'Enough!' Yes, Twitter can be used as an extramural activity that you engage with, but using it as a tool to aid your journalism? Probably not. And should it be your first call of breaking news? I'm not convinced anymore! Before I was, you know, probably the pioneer of breaking news on Twitter, in my newsrooms at least, and digital-first concept and all of that... But the reality of it is that the social media companies have become cannibals of the news environment and have stripped away all our legitimacy." (Anonymous, personal communication, 25 June 2020.)

Smith reported that: "Twitter has occupied an uncomfortable place between journalists and their bosses for more than a decade. It offers journalists both a newswire and a direct line back into the news cycle. But it has also set off a tug of war between the voice of the brand and of the individual. More staid newsrooms, like *The Wall Street Journal* and *Reuters*, have, to varying degrees, barred journalists from breaking news and developing big voices on the service, while some newer and more ideological outlets, like *Vox* and *The Intercept*, encourage and benefit from their journalists' social media presence." (2021).

Although Twitter is now used by journalists globally (Houston et al, 2018), little research has been done on what can or should be taught at journalism schools and what sort of curriculum should be drafted to help and prepare young journalists to use social media in their studies and future work (Martens, 2019). The need for training is paramount to help young journalists understand the opportunities, challenges and impact of using social media in their work. The journalists interviewed concurred in saying that what is most important is to understand Twitter's limitations and not let it direct the news, noting that journalism itself should drive the news – this is a departure from earlier research that highlighted how important Twitter could be to journalism (Gearing, 2014). One of the journalists explained: "If you're using Twitter in order to do news, you are always going to fall short. You need to do primary research. And in the real

world, where real decisions are made by politicians that affect real lives, in terms of poverty, in terms of housing, in terms of education, you have to engage with the real world. And if you do primary research, if you get your affidavits, you get your statements... you cannot do primary research on Twitter, because it's someone's opinion, somebody says something which outrages you; it's very easy; it's a very easy space because no one takes responsibility." (Anonymous, personal communication, 24 June 2020.) Interviewees felt there was a need for better academic curricula, which instead of using Twitter and social networks as an essential tool to conduct journalism, should focus on building suspicion against the platforms and establishing new rules of engagement: What is legitimate criticism? How big should the conversation loop be between a journalist and the public? What should the reaction or discourse be if you are being attacked? These are essential questions that need to be tackled when preparing for a journalism career. One interviewee noted: "Be highly suspicious of absolutely everything and everyone, because there's no accountability... There's an attempt now, as you see with Twitter and Facebook, to try and ban political ads... but the fake news stuff and the spreading of it, in the end, it's about educating yourself, otherwise, you're going to be used; so the chess game is happening of life, if you don't see the moves, if you don't play the game, the game plays you." (Anonymous, personal communication, 24 June 2020.) Further research should be conducted to evaluate what is already being done, if anything, at universities across the world to amend media studies and the journalism curricula to include social media training.

While regulations, policy reforms and legislative responses are slow to be passed, most of the interviewees have taken personal action in the hope of curbing the online violence to which they or their colleagues are often subject. Indeed, all the respondents noted that speaking out about the abuse was liberating and empowering – giving them 'their voice back'. One interviewee explained: "I thought it would be good to start a conversation on social media. After I had healed, and then also the attacks against me were much less over time because the story sort of faded or because then there was an exposé about this Gupta bark machine that was used. And I was also a lot more empowered with my research around fake news as to how the system operates. Once I started talking out about it, I realised what a big problem we're actually facing; and I've spoken to dozens of journalists who would express the same thing to me." (Anonymous, personal communication, 25 June 2020.)

Another important tool that was very helpful to the journalists interviewed was investigating the issue and learning as much as possible about it: What elicits attacks? Who is behind the tweets? What are trolls and bots? (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) This proved to be effective in empowering them with answers and gave them tools with which to fight back. As one journalist noted, they built their own ‘army’ or resistance (Anonymous, personal communication, August 2021.) One respondent noted: “I think to band together and to use our extensive civil society skills to expose these trolling networks, and to keep educating the public about what they see, because social media is now the most influential form of media in South Africa, so you have to keep educating your public about what is happening, what they’re seeing... What has been great is to read studies... and to commune with other women journalists to see, ‘Hey, I’m not alone.’ This is happening around the world, it’s common, and seeking to understand it and expose it has given me an enormous sense of power that you know what you’re dealing with and I can fight you right back. So, when we sued Bell Pottinger, when we found out exactly who was doing it and named Victoria Geoghegan as the key conspirator, those were very important moments. You treat it as an investigation, [it] was really empowering for me.” (Anonymous, personal communication, 30 June 2020.)

Outside of South Africa, in the US, justice on the harassment of journalists seems to be moving forward. In December 2021, US TV anchor, the chief media correspondent for CNN and host of *Reliable Sources*, Brian Stelter, reported that: “A man was sentenced to prison for threatening journalists.” Stelter was one of the journalists receiving threats and harassment. He said: “Many reporters are, sadly, accustomed to receiving threats and harassment in connection with their work. For some, the intimidation can have a chilling effect. For others, it can become like brutal background noise, accepted as part of the job, even when the threats rise to the level of a felony... In a federal courtroom in lower Manhattan, Robert Lemke, a California man and devoted Donald Trump supporter, was sentenced to three years in prison after pleading guilty to sending threats to lawmakers and members of the media.” (Stelter, 2021.) Although the threats were mainly sent via letters, this judgment could set a precedent. Indeed, Stelter argued: “For a free press, this is an especially important baseline to uphold... The press can’t be truly free if it is subject to threats and harassment.” (2021.)

## CONCLUSION

Is Twitter: An opportunity or a curse for South African female journalists? As demonstrated in this dissertation, it could be both: on one side it is an opportunity to expand one's work, discover and share stories, debate ideas or grow one's online community; and on another, it is a curse, a spider web where journalists can get trapped. The platform's structure, its addictive nature and the lack of reaction and response from Twitter's leaders to the attacks of trolls and bots and the danger they represent means the platform can be a threat to its users. The interviews collected are only a tiny representation of the voices of the many female journalists in South Africa and the findings cannot be extended to an entire industry – they only point to certain trends that are significant within the South African context. However, as the literature about Twitter and journalism grows, more experts could be interviewed to give even more in-depth perspectives and solutions on the topic of online violence towards South African female journalists on Twitter and the abusive part of the relationship between the platform, its users and journalists. One trend that arose is the relationship between journalists and Twitter, which seems to work in a closed loop, where the journalist can use the platform as a free tool to communicate facts, ideas, opinions, thoughts and stories and to check what is happening or get tip-offs on story leads, but also risks ending up trapped on the platform; and where the Twitter platform uses journalists as 'free tools' to monitor and fact-check content published on its feeds. Further study on the parallels and dissimilarities between what is defined as an abusive relationship and its correlation with Twitter and journalism would be necessary, as well as more research on the evident benefits of using Twitter in journalism versus its pitfalls. Nonetheless, the interviews and research conducted for this essay significantly helped in the construction of the narrative and narrative arc for the film 'Section 16'. It influenced the way we edited the interviews next to each other: based on the essay, we decided to start with the comparisons with violence during apartheid; then, explain the role of Bell Pottinger in spreading smear campaigns against specific journalists and the effects of those campaigns on the journalists. We concluded the film by focusing on the journalists' strength and desire to be journalists, no matter the threats. At the time of writing, very little had been done to change or prevent online violence against female journalists on social media platforms like Twitter. In fact, Filipino-American journalist, Nobel Peace Prize winner and the co-founder and CEO of *Rappler* in the Philippines, Maria Ressa, who has been fighting the weaponisation of social media, just lost her appeal against a conviction for cyber

libel (Lo, 2022) – with a looming threat of ending in jail. Media’s credibility is being questioned worldwide and fake news is spread faster than a wildfire. In 2022, the work of investigative journalists is imperative – and their presence on social media often an important counterweight to disinformation. Much more need to be done to expose the threats they are facing and to protect them from trolls and bots that try to intimidate them and stop them from doing their work.

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