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MISO GYNY ON THE INTERNET

*Open-field
Bombing
of Journalists**

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Fundación Karisma

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Those of us who work on the intersection of rights and technology continuously hear and repeat that the Internet is a democratizing space, as well as a turning point that has promoted a multiplicity and diversity of voices. Unlike traditional media such as radio, television or the written press, being able to express ourselves no longer depends on the option of being put before a microphone or on a newspaper publishing our letter. Nowadays, if we feel like commenting on a news item, the paper's digital edition most likely has a comment

forum where we can easily participate. We also have social networks to

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communicate our opinions about a news item and even direct it to the person who wrote it. We can also create our own content in a variety of digital platforms. It is the age of the prosumers.

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*This article was published on February 24, 2016 on the Karisma website. Available at <https://karisma.org.co/misoginia-en-internet-bombardeo-a-campo-abierto-contra-las-periodistas/>.

There is no doubt that the Internet has enhanced freedom of expression. Nor is it wrong to point out that the same dynamics that emerge are also excluding

and impeding the exercise of this very right. And there are those who suffer more than others, for example, women, people who identify themselves as LGTBIQ, or ethnic minorities. Does it not strike you that they are the same groups of people who continually suffer discrimination and violence? Well, so it is, the Internet is not very different from the analog world, nor is it the panacea of rights. Cyberspace has become host to, and even amplified, social realities that are continually denounced and rejected, but that still persist and continue to multiply: misogyny, sexism, homophobia, racism, etc.

With this in view, in 2015 we embarked on a project to identify expressions of misogyny online and its consequences within a very specific group of women: journalists. In a country where journalism is a high-risk profession, threats and violence against this trade have been normalized. But worse still, there is no distinction when it is also a case of gender-based violence. And that is what we wanted to explore, because the violence that female journalists receive on the Internet are often different from the male counterparts. These forms of violence are nothing more than manifestations of misogyny.

According to a mapping of violence against women related to technology carried out by the [Association for the Progress of Communications](#) (APC), women professionals with public profiles who participate in communication spaces, among them journalists, are among the 3 categories of women who most experience gender-based violence online.¹ The selection of the group, therefore, is far from trivial.

¹APC. (2015). *Mapping technology-based violence against women*. Available at https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/csw_map.pdf.

What's happening in Colombia? This is what we aimed to explore in this project. For this, we were aided by the [Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa](#)

[Foundation for Press Freedom] and with a group of 25 journalists who accepted our invitation to discuss this issue. From the meetings we held, we were able to share some of our findings:

1. Female journalists are double victims of violence: for their profession and for being women

Violence against journalists is understood as a risk of the trade. But the different types of violence received by women and men who practice this profession are not recognized or distinguished. And the reality is that there is a difference between the causes (profession) and the forms (discourse/gender). That is where we find that female journalists are subject to gender-based violence, directed at them for the very fact of being women.

In other words, online attacks on a woman tend to make frequent references to personal and family relationships; insults in terms of physical appearance and intellectual capacity; and are often sexualized, where the body is used as a weapon and a battlefield. Intimidation does not fall upon ideas or arguments, but rather on the fact that it is a woman who think and speaks out herself.

One of the journalists who participated in our project told the story of a colleague at a feminist communication project that was the victim of physical and online violence. Before the physical attack, social networks were the initial space for intimidation and threats against this journalist. The language used in these messages is quite telling: “Watch out, we’re going to rape you...,” “You’re a little girl,

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you do not know what you're talking about...," "Bitch..." The insults are different for female journalists, and labels matter more, as they seek to damage their reputation and good name, besides silencing them.

2. Gender-based violence on the Internet has real consequences in journalistic practices

Is the Internet real? In a way, cyberspace is different from when we walk on the street and we're insulted or attacked, where the chances of identifying the aggressor are much greater. The Internet does not allow us to know so easily who intimidates or threatens us. Therefore, it is usually conceived as a space without real consequences, and as a fictional place, where identities are hidden. The reality is that online violence does have consequences for its victims, especially when the attacks are personalized.

The stories of the journalists showed again and again that being a victim and even knowing a woman victim of digital attacks has a significant effect on their journalistic practices and on their behavior on the Internet, but, above all, on what they stop saying. We repeatedly learned that after recognizing the Internet as a space of violence, some journalists decided to close social media accounts or in other public media; to be more careful with what they say and publish; to request transfers to different sections in the media outlets where they work; to use pseudonyms or alter egos to prevent the public debate from becoming personal or violent; or to move away from journalism temporarily or permanently; in short, self-censorship.

The fear that threats would materialize is the driver of these habit changes, causing high levels of stress, loss of income, and even loss of a job. If you look more closely, this also has the effect of reducing the women's

representation in digital journalism. But even more, it encourages self-censorship, preventing society from hearing women's voices in journalism and reducing women's participation to spaces that are not so public or so resonant in an era where technology is key.

3. Perception that gender-based violence is left unanswered and/or lacks of support by the profession itself, academia, the authorities, and the digital platforms where they occur

The mistaken idea that what happens on the Internet has no consequences in the offline world also causes a degree of apathy on the part of society. One of the biggest disappointments expressed by journalists is that, in the face of humiliating messages, their closest social circle –both personal and at work–, albeit with good intentions, usually advises that they ignore or do not pay attention to the comments, creating a feeling of helplessness. On the other hand, academia remains indifferent to this problem, where the issue is hardly ever discussed. The profession also seems indolent towards this situation, which is all the more striking given that this violence –and discrimination– is often experienced by journalists within the newsrooms themselves.

The response by the State to reports of online threats or intimidation turns out to be very slow or non-existent. The authorities that receive the complaints, in general, do not know how to handle them, have precarious resources or do not understand the threats, because, since they occur on the Internet, do not consider them as real.

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Meanwhile, the companies that own the platforms where these violent events occur –for example, Twitter, Facebook, or comment forums on media outlets– do not seem to have the right strategies to deal with direct complaints or to minimize expressions of misogyny. Those women journalists who expressed having made a report to a digital platform never received a response.

The perception, then, is that women should be confined to socially accepted spaces; assume a passive role, otherwise, to be ready to take the blame for the violence against them for daring to transgress the *status quo*.

4. There are certain issues that unleash gender-based violence

There is a misconception that women in journalism are more apt to cover soft topics, such as social issues, culture and entertainment. In contrast, male journalists are better at dealing with hard news, such as, politics, judicial, or sports. Whenever a woman decides to cover any of these hard topics, she becomes an open target of what it is a majority male audience, notwithstanding that there are also female voices expressing gender violence.

Other topics that unleash violence are those related to the rights of women or LGBTBIQ persons, feminism, gender, and/or denouncement of sexism and machismo in society. Writing about these issues provokes aggressions and insults that seek to de-legitimize feminism and reduce the power of public influence by women to the very minimum.

Conclusions

There is great ignorance on the part of all parties –victims, authorities, the media and society in general– about how misogyny manifests itself on the Internet, in particular, against journalists. The landscape is still quite unknown, therefore, there is still much more to be studied and analyzed in order to understand

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in depth the causes and consequences of cybermisogyny in the field of journalism in Colombia. Bringing visibility to these cases is also important to raise awareness among the various parties and seek solutions that allow the Internet to be that broad democratized space that we talked about at the beginning. The silence caused by gender-based violence on the Internet should not be allowed or accepted. It is necessary to de-normalize violence against those who practice a profession of great public interest, such as journalism.

Meanwhile, this project allows us to recognize that the road ahead is long and that all parties have a role to play. The State must renew its commitment to gender equality and actively promote it at all levels. In addition, the authorities in charge of addressing allegations of gender-based violence on the Internet must develop and/or improve their capacities to deal with this problem.

The companies that own the digital platforms, without a doubt, have to act more assertively and adequately towards manifestations of misogyny. The media, professional associations, and academia

must react and establish strategies, inclusive languages, guidelines and/or policies that promote a culture of zero tolerance for violence and its rejection, especially gender-based violence, as well as educating their staff and the public.

It is indisputable that digital literacy should not only provide the skills needed to use digital technologies, but also those that promote ethical behavior as well as debates that enrich collective knowledge and strengthen the plurality of ideas and opinions.

Finally, it is necessary for journalists to know and apply best practices for self-care and digital security. Although this will not stop the manifestations of misogyny, it can help prevent some attacks and minimize vulnerabilities. The creation of support and solidarity networks is another way of empowering, and sending the clear message that women have an equal right to speak out in any medium without fear of what might happen. In addition to learning about the resources that are available for filing complaints, it is important to learn about strategies to counteract violence and establish screen capture routines that allow for the storing of online violence content.

Let's occupy the Internet and let our feminine voices be heard loud and clear!

We invite you to watch these videos by the journalists [Gina Morelos](#) and [Natalia Zuazo](#), in which they discuss the subject as part of our campaign "[Machitroll alert](#)", which seeks to identify violence online and make it visible through humor.