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Trolling in the deep

Trolls and tribulations

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A journalist never forgets their first reader complaint. Until the second one. By the third, possibly in the same week, you realise that robust feedback is an occupational hazard. So too is occasional vitriolic abuse and even threats of violence. In the social media era, that abuse – and forgive the attempted Twitterism – has been significantly #levelledup.

Think of Twitter as an over-crowded Wild West peopled by anonymous keyboard gunslingers and you'd be at least half right. Like sci-fi thriller Westworld, once you peel back the veneer many inhabitants turn out to be robots. And it's not always easy to tell which are flesh and which are not.

Real of otherwise, this bunch of cowboys can form lynch mobs and round on journalists – all behind the masks of their digital avatars. Threats of murder, rape and endangering loved ones are not uncommon – and far more likely to be aimed at women, research has shown. Ugly hate speech is often in the mix too. Abuse can be personal, persistent and humiliating.

Of course, threatening a journalist's life and livelihood is not a phenomenon invented in the digital age. But the platform for abuse is global, immediate and connected. And it's just so much easier to reach into the lives of reporters online than by using the old ways.

True, we may be seeing renewed efforts by news outlets to engage with communities. But often journalists on local beats are themselves hidden behind keyboards or based in out-of-town newsrooms. Walk up complaints to front desk reception are dying out. Hairdryer treatment over the phone is also old hat. Now disgruntled, disaffected and sometimes deranged critics use social media to vent, mobilise the masses and form a bullying ring around reporters.

Latterly, an alarming trend has emerged: open hostility towards media professionals in the social space. Experts and academics have been targeted too. Faceless trolls with several numbers after their Twitter handle have been joined by actual, identifiable people, including public figures, stirring up hate. The troll commander-in-chief in the US is Donald Trump. He has namechecked journalists in his caps lock tirades, singling out individuals for savage, semi-coherent assaults. Also in the US, Washington Post journalist Felicia Sonmez fled to a hotel earlier this year after internet abuse turned into credible threats against her life. She had tweeted a link to Kobe Bryant's sexual assault trial coverage in the wake of the basketball star's death.

Journalists in the UK are experiencing the same intolerable pressures. So, why put yourself through this by posting on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and Twitter?

For many the answer is simple: you have no choice. You can't opt out of social, at least not if you want to get story tip-offs, rapidly reach sources and drive traffic towards the articles you are paid to promote.

The rewards for success on social media are potentially significant – life-changing, even. As well as oiling the cogs of your practice, developing a portable audience through your personal following is a commodity valued by employers. When The Athletic launched in the UK with a hiring spree of talented national and regional sports journalists, they created instant reach by snapping up millions of social media followers virtually overnight. Having many Twitter followers and an authenticated account pays.

The downside of social media is just as extreme. The abuse in this space is horrific – and at times hard to understand. One of the more curious aspects of online trolling is the disconnect between the almost innocuous 'offence' and the scale of the febrile rage it inspires. Most comments made by a journalist are not at all personal, and yet they can draw brutal and devastating ire.

When technology journalist Chris Stokel-Walker wrote about K-Pop band BTS he knowingly crossed the group's legions of fans. In an article for The Telegraph, he followed up news of a car crash caused by one of the group's singers, Jungkook. He highlighted social media spamming by fans, a tactic of posting floods of content to bury news of the crash. It was an attempt to control the media narrative and protect the reputation of the star – pushing the crash news down the agenda and surfacing positive stories instead.

The backlash from fans was, sadly, inevitable. Stokel-Walker received death threats, and the accuracy of his journalism was questioned in waves. While challenging reporting is clearly legitimate, doing so systematically, by shouting and in full view of someone's employers with apparent disregard for the facts is a stiff test of resilience. Social is a high stakes game.

When Stephanie Finnegan, a reporter for Reach PLC's Leeds Live, successfully challenged an order banning mentions of court proceedings involving 'Tommy Robinson', she was hailed for taking a stand in the name of transparent justice. But she was also subjected to rape threats and death threats from people claiming to be supporters of 'Robinson', real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon. Soon trolls were trying to track down Finnegan's address and posting information about the area her mother lived in. Police patrols were stepped up around her home and she was issued with a personal alarm by police. All for daring to stand up to Yaxley-Lennon.

These stories are not the construct of same mainstream media, sorry #MSM, conspiracy. These are tales from a frontier that at time feels decidedly short of a sheriff.

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