



‘Catch Her... Kill Her’

A TV journalist’s horrifying experience in one of the world’s most dangerous countries for reporters saw her leaving it, but the explicit cyber threats followed her. Studies show a staggering 72.5% of online harassment worldwide is targeted at women.

WORDS PAULA SLIER

A few months ago, I suddenly found myself dropping to the ground and crouching in long grass with bullets whirring overhead. Minutes earlier, I’d been following a group of pro-Russian fighters conducting a sweep of an area in eastern Ukraine to make sure it was ‘clean’ of the Ukrainian military. For a few frozen moments, my world stood still.

Everything was deathly quiet aside from the frighteningly close cracking of gunfire. Somewhere in the distance a dog was barking and the commander was shouting... Yes, I was afraid.

Last May, I was sitting in a hotel room, warm water lazily filling a bath tub nearby. I switched on my phone and instantly paled. I was just as afraid.

“Scum of the earth”, “f*** her”, “take a knife and pull out all her Russian shit”.

My Twitter feed had gone into overdrive and as I scrolled down each message, the abuse intensified.

I was on assignment in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, reporting for the Moscow-based broadcaster, Russia Today. The two countries were at war with each other and a local activist had picked up on my location and started a manhunt – “not just to catch her but to kill her”.

Within hours, I was on a plane out of the country. I arrived at the airport with dark glasses and a scarf. If I hadn’t been so afraid, it might have been funny.

Ukraine is currently the third most dangerous country for journalists to work in. The online harassment I faced, and continue to face, is not unique to Ukraine though, or for that matter, to journalists in general.

But what the threats uniquely focus on is my gender – the fact that I’m a woman – and the explicit threats are of extreme violence to rape and assault me. Most of my so-called online detractors focus their criticism less on my work and more on me.

My experience echoes the stories of other female journalists, writers and bloggers. A staggering 72.5% of online harassment is targeted at women, according to the Organisation for Safety and Co-operation in Europe.

The issue is of such concern that a special panel has been set up to address it. Trolling has become a favorite past-time for people buoyed by the anonymity and safety the online world offers. It is easy to sit in your home and spurt threats at anyone with views you don’t like. Legislation is far from water-tight in preventing it and what gives these words so much power is the incitement they can evoke and the very real possibility for them to be carried out in the real world.

I was in a taxi, lost, in an outlying suburb of Beirut, Lebanon. The driver had been circling the same neighborhoods for more than an hour and it was starting to get dark and I was getting concerned.

In such a situation, GPS tracking is a godsend – not just for finding one’s way but for alerting one’s editors to a possible abduction attempt. Today, journalists are seen as legitimate targets – no longer do we merely cover the story; in many instances we’ve become the story – whether online or in the real world.

The number one fear we all share is that of being kidnapped. Paradoxically though, while switching on my cellphone’s GPS that day in Beirut and increasing my security, I also decreased it by alerting online detractors as to where I was.

The risks are greater when you’re a woman in the field than a man. In many parts of the world, women journalists are a strange persona for those with preconceived ideas of where a woman’s place should be.

Once, during an embed (term for a journalist attached to a military unit in conflict areas) with American soldiers in the Afghan province of Zabul, a group of children came running after us, laughing and joking. I was weighed down by a bullet-proof jacket, helmet and backpack, but through the military sunglasses that kept slipping down my nose I could see the children pointing at my red-painted finger nails.

When we eventually took a breather and I removed my helmet, one of the more courageous boys plucked up the courage to step forward and ask: “Ma’am, do your parents know you’re here?”

All voices need to be heard, whether male or female, whether for or against the views one holds. Courage lies not only in speaking out for what one believes in, but for making sure the views of those we disagree with are given a platform. **FW**

– The writer is South African and the Middle East bureau chief of Russia Today. She was reporting for the channel in Kiev when a manhunt started against her and she had to exit.



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Sliver in Ukraine

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