

A Survey Report: Threats to Safety of Journalists in India

• Safety • Threats • Impunity

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Research Team:- Umesh Singh, Brij Bhushan, Ms Sarah Nazamuddin, Arpit Mallick, Saurabh, Ms. Angelina Dash & Ms. Hema.

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Tribute to Media Martyrs



The National Union of Journalists (India)-NUJ(I) in short, is an umbrella organisation of working journalists and is engaged for betterment and causes of journalists in the country since 1972. It has 23 State units covering almost all States of the country. It is also affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Brussels, Belgium. The National Union of Journalists (India), the largest trade union for the journalists in the country. The NUJ(I) headed by Shri Prajnananda Choudhuri, President and Shri Sheo Kumar Agarwal, Secretary General has always effectively discharging its duties towards the journalistic community. A decade ago, the NUJ(I) is the only organisation who raise the issue of Journalists Protection Act. Our former president Ras Bihari and Ratan Dixit Secretary General has played a vital role to raise the issue in different platforms, they organised dharnas, seminars, symposium and workshops in different part of the country during their tenure. Our state units are also active to demand the issue in their respective district headquarters under the guidance of the NUJ(I) leadership

The NUJ(I), always stresses the demand for Media Council being set up by a new law expanding the Press Council legislation to take care of the emerging media environment. We want the provisions in the proposed Media Council, which not only helps in keeping a watch on the media but also protects the interests of the working journalists. Such an effective body can be created within the Journalist Protection Act only.

NUJ(I) is sure that unless journalists are free to fearlessly pursue the truth the entire edifice of democracy may collapse. The strength of the edifice is the relentless exposure of the reality behind the showpieces of society. This constitutes the public interest. And it is working journalists as the trench soldiers of the public interest who alert the people of the truth. The anti-social elements in many sectors are hell bent on blocking this vital function of exposure. Hence it is the bounden duty of the Indian State to ensure the environment that enables working journalists to pursue their professional work freely and fearlessly.

The enactment of a Journalists Protection Act, Media Council and Media Commission are an immediate necessity. The Central and State Governments at the highest level must immediately start consultations with journalists representatives to place such a legislation on the statute book that makes public authorities sensitive and responsible specifically to this need.

NUJ (I) Office Bearer

Shri Prajnananda Chaudhuri, President Shri Sheo Kumar Agarwal, Secretary General

Ms. Seema Kiran, Treasurer & Shri Ratan Dixit

© **Shri Rash Bihari, Former President, NUJ (I)**

RESEARCHER'S NOTE

In any democracy, the most important job of media person is to uphold the freedom of expression and the right of the people to know.

Growing concerns of physical safety and in some cases, death of journalists in India need to be addressed urgently.

According to United Nations, in the past twelve years (2006-2018) close to 1310 journalists have been killed for reporting the news and bringing information to the public. In nine out of ten cases, the killers go unpunished. Impunity leads to more killings and is often a symptom of worsening conflict and the breakdown of law and judicial systems.

The alleged killers of Gauri Lankesh, a female editor, who was gunned down outside her house in Bengaluru in September 2017 & Syed Shujaat Bukhari, the editor-in-chief of Rising Kashmir, who was killed on June 14, 2018 outside his office, suspects have been identified but not yet brought to justice.

The threat is very high in India and many a time goes unnoticed at national level when crime is against non-English language reporters outside of major cities. It is high time that all media person extend the helping hand to our colleague working at grassroots.



Umesh Singh, Journalist & Head Research Team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Col. (Retd.) Gulveer Singh
Chairman, The Vision Foundation

The years 2008-2018 were the most brutal years in terms of violence against journalists worldwide, and it is understood that threats to journalists' safety seriously affect their right to freedom of expression. This study is probably the first comprehensive & empirical survey designed to assess the impact of contextual factors on journalists' safety. The questionnaire is inspired by globally adopted indicators developed by institutions like the United Nations & Freedom House. However, the uniqueness of this study is that it offers quantitative and qualitative insights into the issues of journalists' safety, work-related

safety, work-related 'motive-confirmed' deaths of journalists in India, impunity and other contemporary debate taking place in India.

Interviewees' responses suggest that journalists face physical, psychological and emotional risks because of many factors like sharp division of ideology among citizens, high voltage political situations; impunity for crime against journalists; ethical dimensions of journalism etc.

Around 823 media persons were a part of the survey, out of which approximately 21 percent were female, 266 were associated with print news (215 newspapers & 51 magazines), 263 worked for Online Media, 98 were television journalists & Freelance. Online media is a new trend emerging in India due to increasing penetration of smart phones & low-cost data regimes.

Findings reveal that three-fifth (approximately 61 %) of the surveyed journalists faced threats and/or pressure at some point of time; on the other hand, 76% journalists say that either no safety protocol exists or that they were not trained for safety issues.

The best part of the findings is that truth and accuracy are two policies that are important to journalists. Ensuring accuracy of news published (74%), followed by reporting exclusive news (13%) and being the first one to publish news (11%) seem to be the top 3 priorities of the media organizations in which the respondents work.

When asked about the biggest challenge faced by the journalism sector in the 21st century, 33% felt it was increasing attacks on freedom of press, followed by 21% respondents who felt that fake/paid news is the biggest challenge. 18% respondents also felt that social networking sites and influencers bypassing traditional media is yet another challenge.

35% of the respondents who faced threats/harassment believe that the angle or the way a story was reported by them (left/right/centre) is the reason for being threatened or harassed, followed by their political ideology (19%) and the media organization they work in (9%).

39% said they never received any threat, whereas 29% of the respondents disclosed that they received threats once in a year, and 19% of the respondents received threats several times a month.

Around 46 % respondents (25 % official & 21 % personal account) out of those who were threatened, claimed that social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook were the medium, followed by 17% respondents who were threatened via private messaging apps like WhatsApp/Message.

70% of the respondents revealed that no safety protocol or training has been implemented in their respective media organizations.

44% respondents (out of those who reported the issue) report such cases to their media organizations whereas only 12% report to the police/ other law enforcement agencies. 21% of respondents who approached authorities claimed that when they approached legal authorities, an FIR was registered & another 7% of respondents claimed they were given police protection or some form of interim protection/help.

The majority of journalists feel 'safety' is a prerequisite of professional & independent journalism, but, at the same time, media persons must adhere to the principles of ethical journalism, impartiality, accuracy and truthfulness. The existing climate of impunity in India is a major concern & poses a threat to journalists' freedom – especially for those adhering to the ethical principles of truthfulness and accuracy. The fact remains that journalists of all types, lineage or inclination are facing problems, irrespective of their ideology being left, centre or right wing. The environment is full of distrust from views across the other line.

The Indian Government & media group must immediately adopt The UN's 'Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists', which has been endorsed by the UN's Chief Executive Board in 2012, which aims to promote safe journalism by mobilizing different stakeholders, including UN agencies, governments, governmental bodies, NGOs, media organizations and workers, civil society members and academics.

On the contrary, some journalists do admit that, in some cases, journalists' political and ideological affiliations do affect their professionalism and become a reason for targeting, but this principle is applicable for all types of ideologies, hence, the time to introspect has come for many. An interviewee revealed, “Instead of just putting all the blame on the government or media owners, we must introspect how journalists manipulate facts by virtue of their individual political and ideological inclinations.” Some feel it is high time online media got equal treatment as compared to other forms of journalism.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's fast paced and glamour driven life, journalism is still considered one of most fascinating career options. Many youth have chosen Journalism as his/her passion to serve the country, whereas some feel covering human rights violations, corruption, investigative reporting are a noble way of serving the mankind. Journalists and media professionals perform a critical role in bringing news for the public so that can bring misdeeds to light, make public institutions accountable and contribute to the creation of more just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

Community like Journalist particularly women, RTI activists and whistleblowers are most venerable truth teller or seeker in India. Murder, Death threat, sexual abuse are most common prize for journalists, activists, and whistleblowers who take risk in challenging powerful vested interests or for expressing dissent. The emergence of social media in every hand has only exacerbated the problem, with women journalists facing the brunt of the attacks on social media most.

Across the world including India, journalism remains a dangerous profession. Speaking truth to power, investigating crime and corruption, holding governments to account and reporting from insecure contexts often carry risks of violent retaliation, harassment and arbitrary detention. Journalists risk their lives by putting themselves in different context like volatile political situation, war, and natural disasters like flood and internal security challenges.

Journalists face a threat, abuse, assaults, harassment and sometimes killing as they do their jobs and engage with their stakeholders. Journalist particularly females are more likely to receive wild comment much more than their male counterparts, this harassment is more likely to target women based on their gender or sexuality.

The period between 2008 and 2018 has seen an increase in the frequency and regularity of harassment and violence directed towards journalists compared to previous years, most significantly in the number of journalist skilled while carrying out their work.

Impunity for the killing of journalists prevails as the predominant trend, with the vast majority of crimes remaining unresolved or no progress on investigation. Impunity is considered a key obstacle to ensuring journalists' safety, while producing a strong chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of expression

Journalists facing threats to their physical safety have been found to be particularly **vulnerable to digital threats**, and they are often unable or unwilling to take steps to mitigate **digital risks**.

Digital dimensions of attacks cover cyber-attacks on websites and equipment; arbitrary surveillance; and online harassment. These can all be occupational hazards for those producing and disseminating journalism.

Digital security is imperative for not only individual journalists themselves, but also for the protection of their sources and their colleagues in the field.

Of those journalists facing threats because of their work, only few use email encryption, and even when journalists are aware of risks to their digital security, digital security tools are often overly technical, leading few journalists to implement the tools correctly, if at all.

Educating journalists and media professionals on the **fundamentals of digital safety**, such as *end-to-end encryption, virtual private networks (VPNs) and malware detection and avoidance*, has become a greater priority for civil society and media professionals.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

This safety survey report provides the first comprehensive empirical picture of the problem faced by media persons in reporting the news. It describes the types of violence and threats journalists encounter and how these incidents affect their ability to conduct their work. We also identify trends among reported incidents, with the hope of improving the ways in which the safety concerns of journalists are addressed.

In this Survey, media persons were asked questions relating to physiological, psychological trauma, mode of threats, harassment, remedial measures available etc during their work. The aim of survey is to generate public interest, discourse on safety issues of journalists, and provide a knowledge-based platform according to which future interventions and initiatives to address the violations against the media persons can be designed.

The findings of the survey are published on the eve of the National Press Day in India. The National Press Day in India is celebrated in India on the 16th of November each year since 1966 as a symbol of a free and responsible press in the country. The day marks the establishment of the Press Council of India (PCI) in India as moral watchdog to the fourth pillar of the country, also to ensure that the press maintains the quality and high standards expected from it and does not get affected by any external factors in its functioning.

'The Vision Foundation' conducted a study to understand how journalists deal with this harassment and what influence it has on their ability to do their jobs. The many questions in survey are aimed to understand to what extent – if any – does harassment influence & affect journalists in their professional work & personal life? In addition, what strategies do journalists use to prevent or safeguard this harassment or deal with it once it has occurred?

It is important to note that the objective of this study is not only to assess the number of journalists experiencing threat, but also to gauge the nature and frequency of these types of safety violations. The report also offered some recommendations about what individuals and media organisations might do to mitigate the dangers of reporting in hostile environments and provide a safe working environment in India.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report were collected from an online and offline survey as well as face to face interview conducted in English & Hindi, from 1st November, 2019 to 13th November, 2019.

The survey was distributed using a snowball and purposive sampling technique, under which research team contacted media persons from the databases of Press Information Bureau (PIB) accredited journalists, editors, cameramans (2019), the directory of various state governments, known circle of journalists etc. We have also taken help of senior journalists and asked them to forward the survey to their colleagues, editors and extended networks. On three different days, our team visited Press Club of India and took face to face interview to take feedback for our report beyond survey questions.

823 responded to the survey, 172 of whom self identified as women. Percentages in this section and throughout the report have been rounded to the nearest number.

Personal identifiable demographic fields in the survey such as name, email address, and organizational affiliation were deliberately & intentionally NOT recorded by system/surveyor mainly to encourage media person to express views free on percept. Team did not accepted open response via link sharing. Further link was only send to media person online/offline so, team are sure that only verified respondents' participated.

We collected qualitative data through open-response field, where participants were able to expand and explain their quantitative answers in last Question 15.

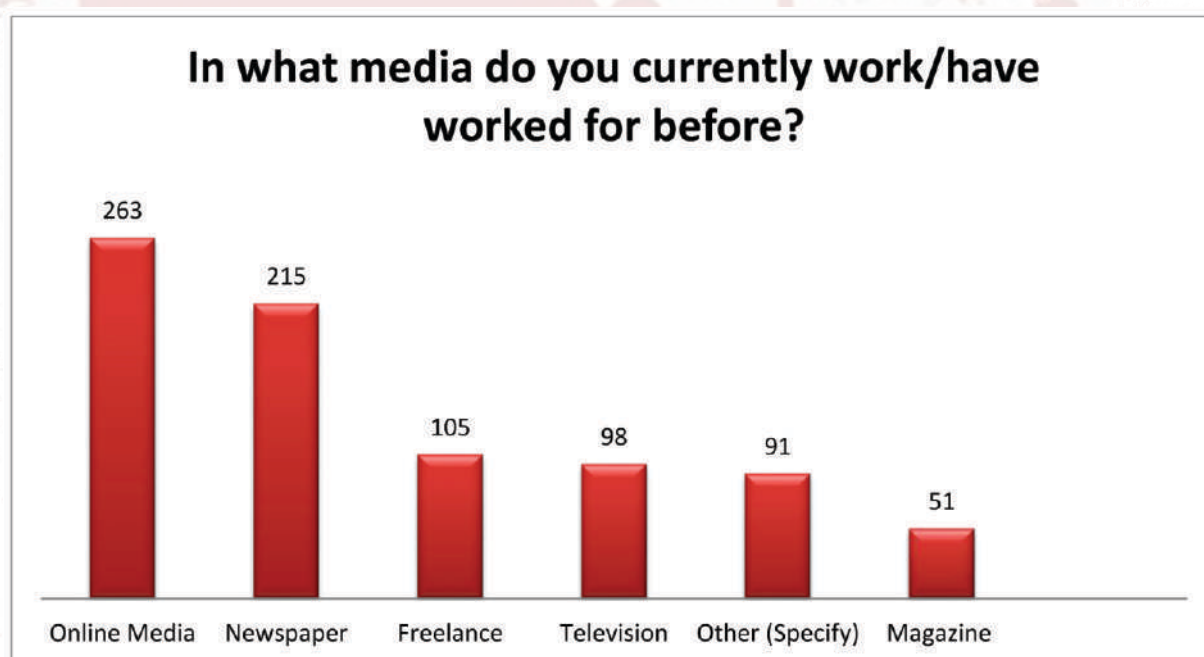
KEY FINDINGS

A national survey of over 800 journalists and media persons reveals that while journalism is under threat around the globe, situation in India is alarming. This report is based on the findings of a survey on harassment and violence against journalist including associated & extended media workers like camera persons, online portal etc. Survey were conducted in whole of India and about half of the respondents work in the metro cities and rest are from regional pocket of India.

Nearly three-fifth of survey respondents said they had experienced some form of intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work, ranging in severity from name-calling to death threats. Many powerful lobbyists are using physical and social media strategies against journalist particularly media workers who express views openly to intimidate, sow disinformation, discredit the journalist and the news media, and create significant professional harm.

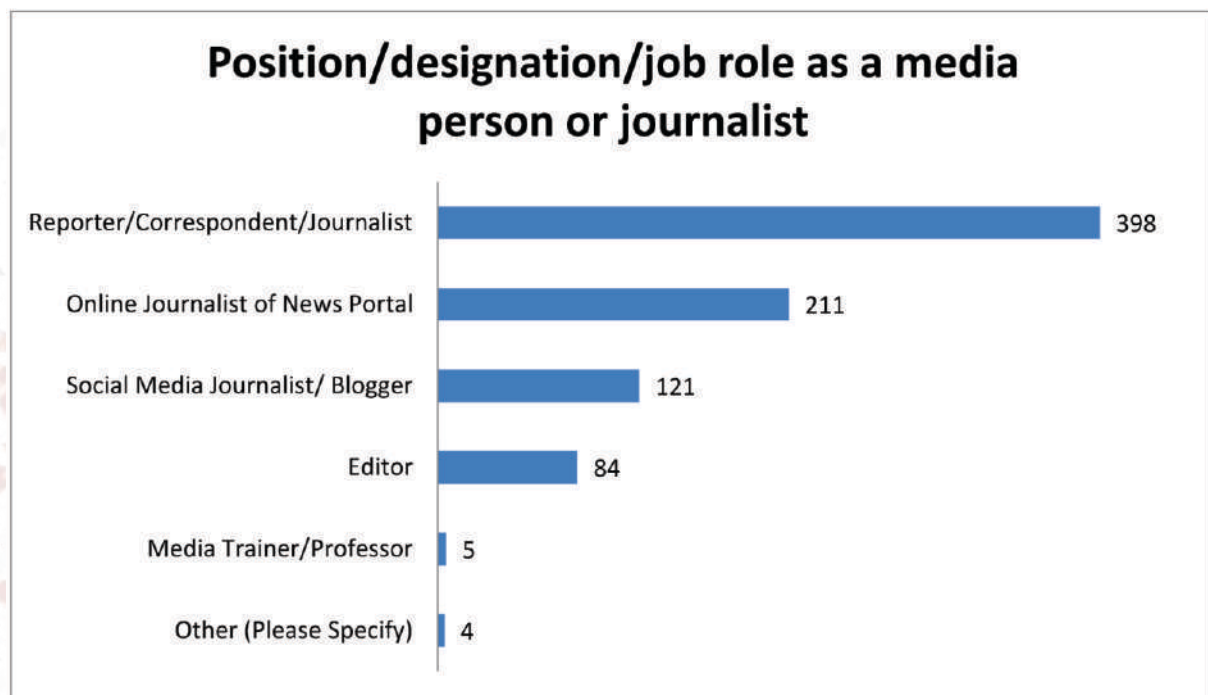
Respondents overwhelmingly suggested that organizations either do not have safety protocol or not sensitizing about it.

Profile of Respondents



Of the 823 respondents, the largest number 263 worked for Online Media. Newspaper was the second type of mass media in which 215 of the respondents worked. Freelance were 105 and television journalists were 98. A smaller segment 51 said they worked in magazines. Online media is emerging trend in india and there is a need of proper media regulation.

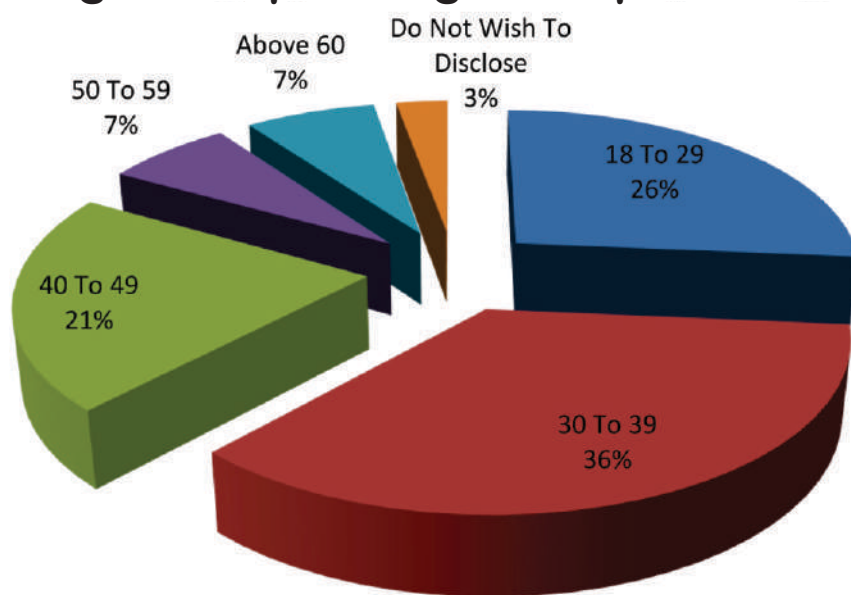
Job discription of respondents



Highest no. of responses were received from reporters/correspondents/journalists 398, followed by 211 of online Journalist of News Portal and 121 of Social Media Journalist/Blogger. This reflects the fact that threats and harassments are faced at the level of reporters and correspondents who are working on news reports on a day to day basis. Survey confirmed that repoters are the backbone of media groups.

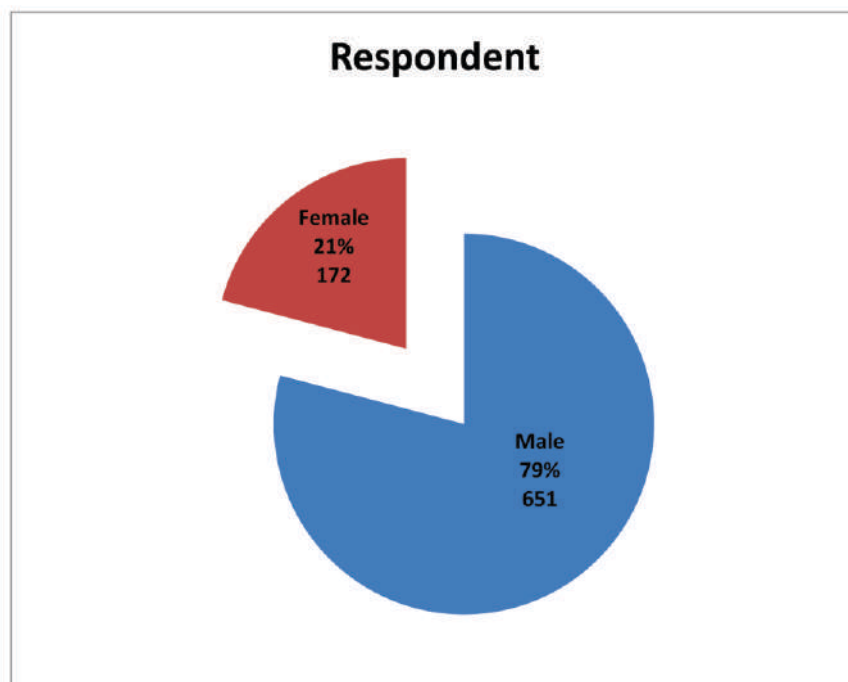
Age Group

Age wise profiling of respondents



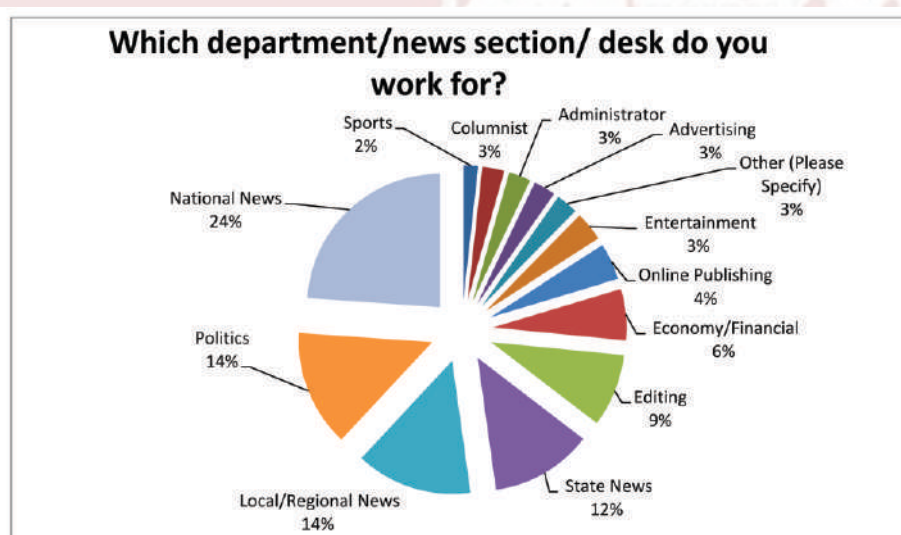
Around 36% of the respondents belonged to the age group of thirties, followed by the 26% belonging to the age group of 18-29 years. Servey revealed that youth from age group between 18 to 39 are the main pillor of media.

Gender Profile



Out of the 823 responses, 79% of the responses were from male media persons and journalists. Only 21% of responses were from the female journalists.

News section/news desk/ department of respondents (More than one choice was allowed in the survey)

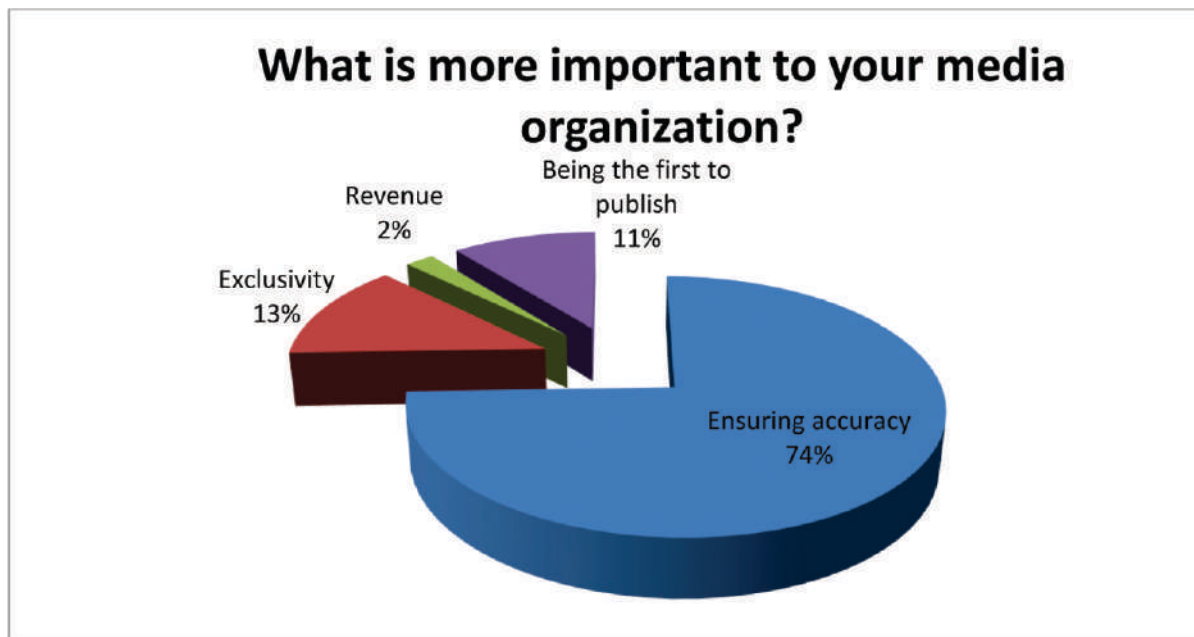


The top 5 news sections/news desks/departments in which the sample population works is as follows (More than one choice was allowed for this section in the survey):

- National News- 24%
- Politics- 14%
- Local/Regional News- 14%
- State News- 12%
- Editing- 9%

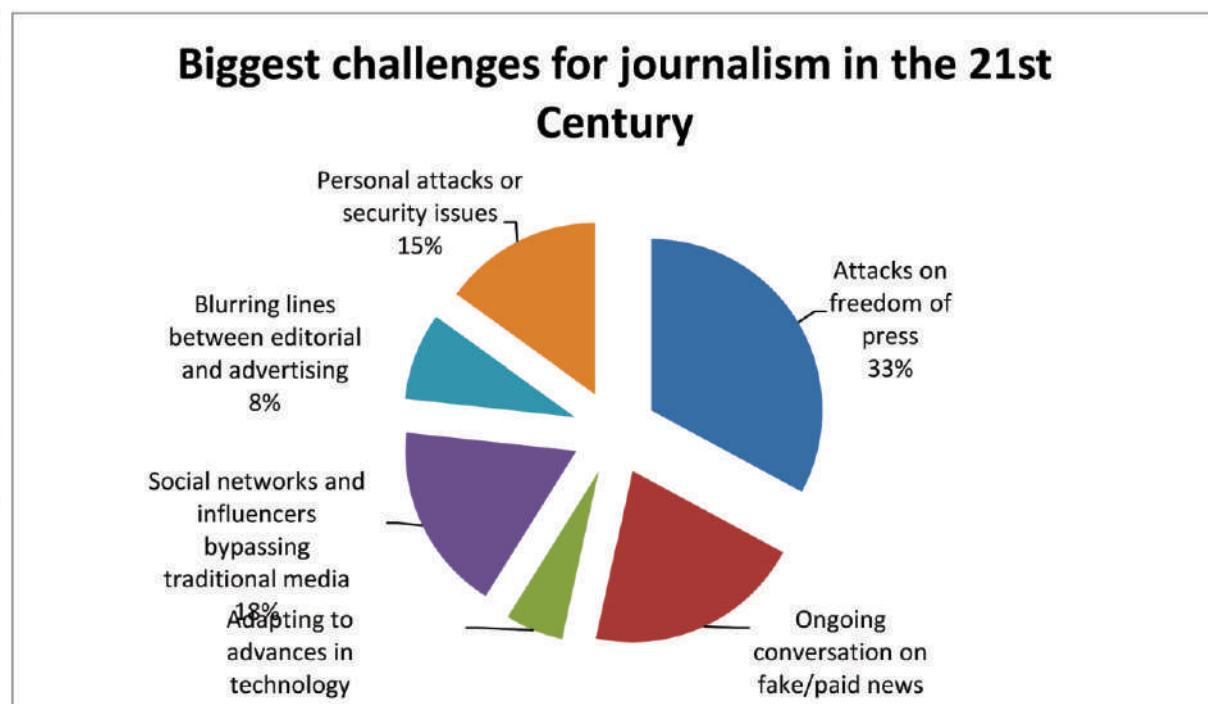
These are basically the departments/news desks dealing with crucial as well as controversial news reports on a daily basis and media persons & journalists working in these can be considered to be prone to both threats and harassments.

Priorities of Media Organizations



Ensuring accuracy of news published (74%), followed by reporting exclusive news (13%) and being the first one to publish news (11%) seems to be the priority of the media organizations in which the respondents work. Journalist/Media persons are less concerned about economic growth and or profit. Given the choice, ensuring accuracy followed by exclusivity was the main preference of the respondents.

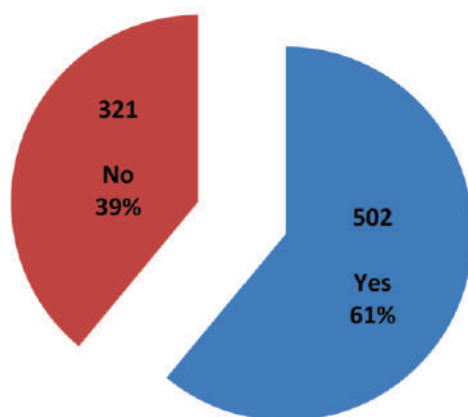
Biggest Challenges to Journalism in 21st Century



According to 33% of respondents to the survey, the biggest challenge facing the journalism industry is of increasing attacks on freedom of press, followed by 21% respondents who are of the opinion that ongoing conversation on fake/paid news is the biggest challenge. 18% respondents also feel that social networks and influencers bypassing traditional media is yet another challenge.

Respondent facing threats/harassments

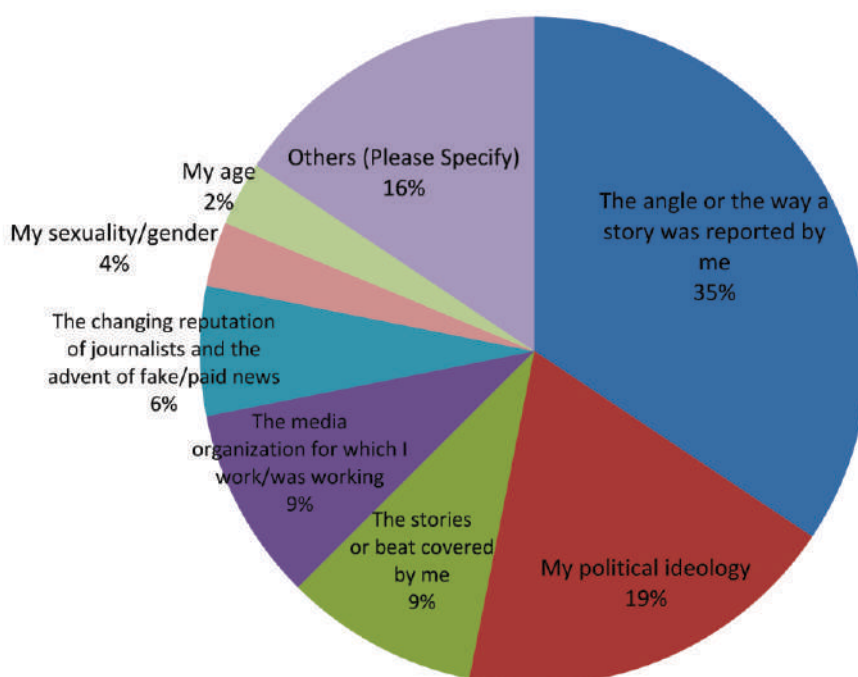
Have you ever been threatened and harassed?



Whopping 61% respondents out of the 823 responses have disclosed that they have been threatened and harassed.

Reasons for being threatened/harassed

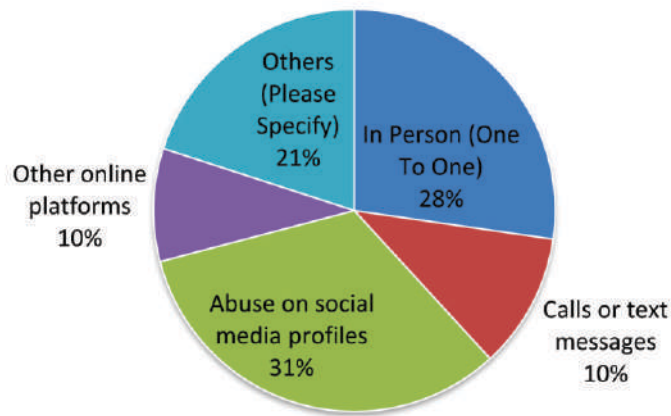
Reasons for Threatened or Harassed (In case you threatened)



35% of the respondents who faced threats/harassments believe that the angle or the way a story was reported by them (left/right/or centre) is the reason for being threatened or harassed followed by their political ideology 19% and media organization they work in 9% and the news/beat covered by them 9%.

Mode of threat and harassment

What is the mode of threat and harassment?

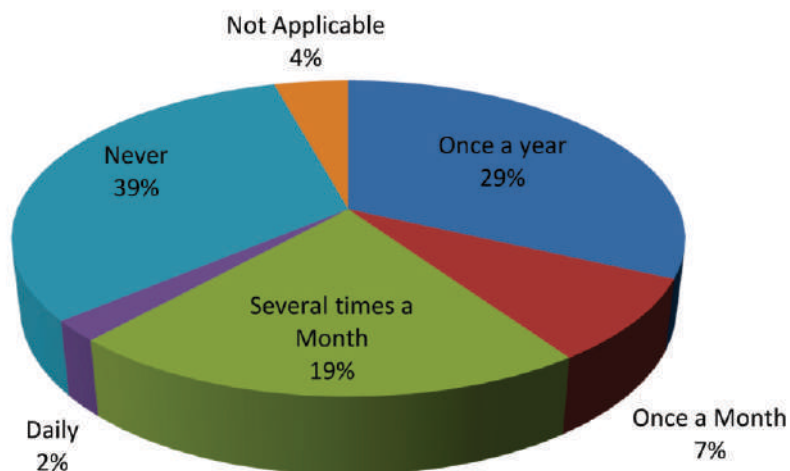


The top 3 mode of threat and harassment according to the survey:

- Abuse on social media profiles- 31%
- In person (One to One)- 28%
- Calls or Text Messages- 10%

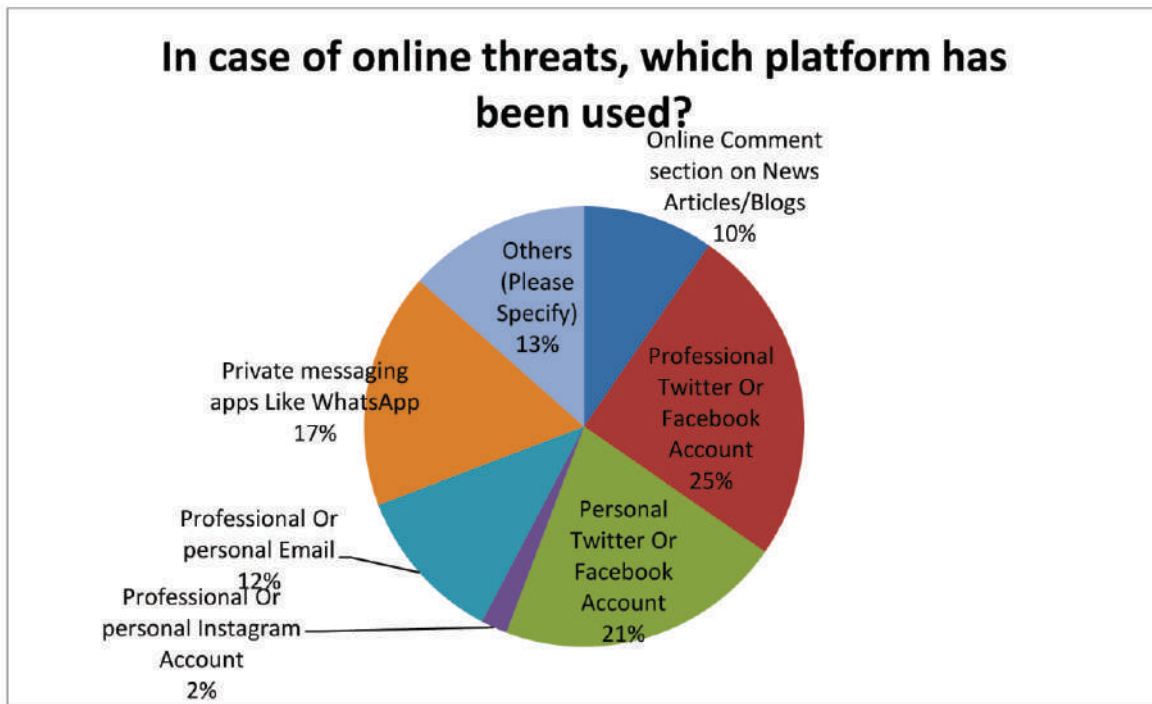
Instances of threat/attack/harassment

How frequently have you experienced threats/attacks/harassment?



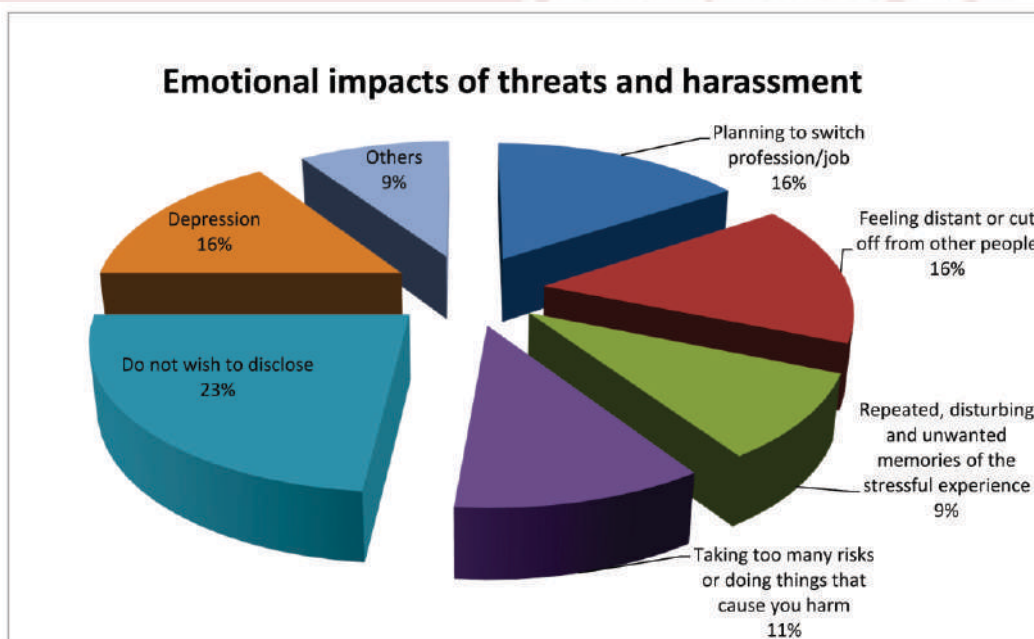
29% of the respondents disclosed that they received threats once in a year and 19% of the respondents received threats several times a month. Very few attacked on daily basis.

Platform used for online threats (Only those who faced threats)



Around 25% respondents were threatened via their professional Twitter or Facebook Account, followed by 21% respondents who were threatened via personal Twitter or Facebook Account, followed by 17% respondents who were threatened via private messaging apps like WhatsApp.

Emotional impacts of threats/harassments

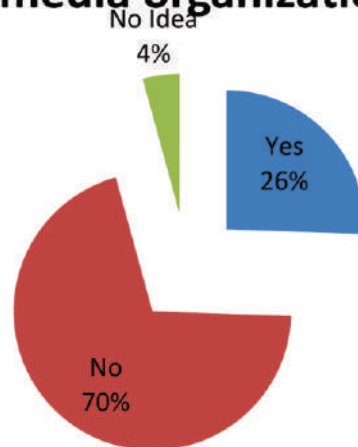


The prominent emotional impacts of threats/harassments among the respondents are:

- Planning to switch profession/job- 16%
- Depression- 16%
- Feeling cut off/distant from other people- 16%
- Taking too many risks or doing things that cause you harm- 11%
- Repeated, disturbing and unwanted memories of the stressful experience – 9%

Safety protocol/trainings in Media Organizations

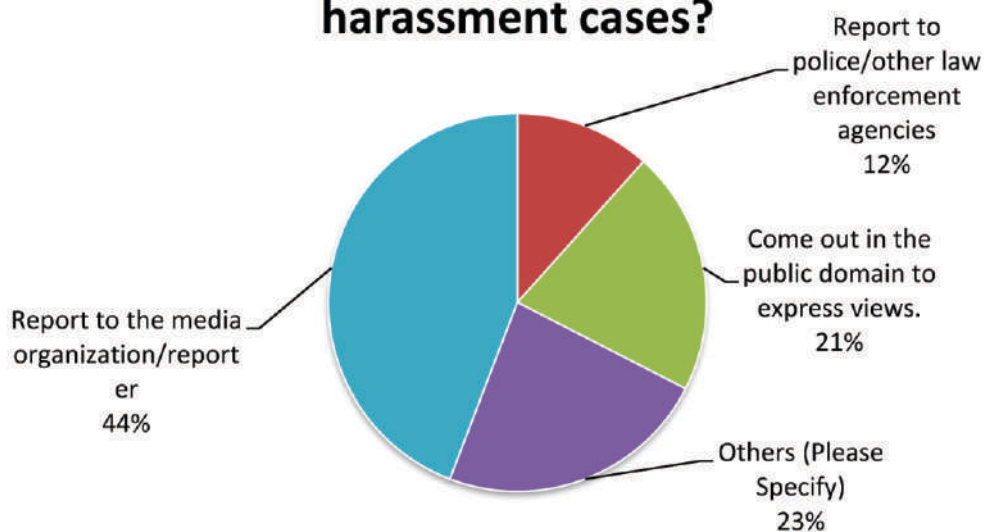
Safety protocols or training implemented in media organization



70% of the respondents revealed that there is no safety protocol or training implemented in their respective media organizations.

Reporting of such threat & harassment (Only those who faced threat)

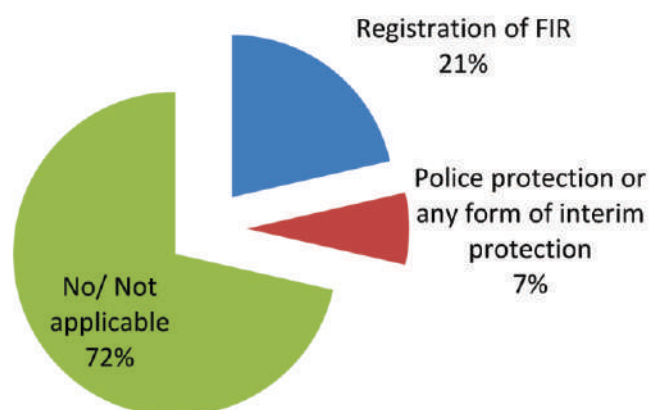
Where do you report such threat or harassment cases?



44% respondents report such cases to their media organizations whereas 21% respondents come out in the public to express views. Only few of respondents, 12% report the matter to the police/ other law enforcement agencies.

Redress mechanism/help from law enforcement agencies in such cases of threats and harassment

Any redress mechanism or help from law enforcement agencies when you approached with your problem?



While 21% of respondents claimed that FIR was registered when such cases of threats and harassments were reported, 7% of respondents claimed they were given police protection or any form of interim protection.

Safety of Journalists in India



RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ 'The Press Council of India (PCI)', an independent body that print media houses are answerable to, however, due to the lack of power is perceived in the media circle as the 'toothless tiger'. The government must empower the council rather than letting it remain as an institution that can only recommend suggestions.
- ◆ There should be a protection law or legislation to protect journalists. The establishment of a framework capable of ensuring the safety of journalists at risk and, especially, of providing proper protection for those who say they have been threatened.
- ◆ Training at work place on the safety of journalists and digital challenges.
- ◆ In India, Press associations exist in every corner of the country but are scattered in their efforts and advocacy for safe work environment. There is a need to strengthen press associations across the country including publication of safety kit, template of complaint etc.
- ◆ The swift and independent investigation of cases where journalists have been murdered, or have been the targets of attempted murder, in order to put an end to the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators and instigators of such crimes.
- ◆ India should immediately participate in UNESCO's impunity accountability mechanism in letter & spirit. This will show India's inclination to recognize the issue and make efforts to improve safety of journalists as well as ensure harsher consequences for the accused.
- ◆ News organisations need to draw up a code of conduct, standard operating procedure, ethical conduct that allows journalists to do their work impartially and without fear of censorship.
- ◆ Finally, digital platform like mobile app by the media association to report hate messages and threats directed at journalists.
- ◆ Social media giants like Facebook and Twitter must be made more accountable for timely resolution of grievances of journalists facing threats.

WAY FORWARD

There is a visible gap between the safety of journalists and measures adopted and awareness about mechanisms for dealing with the problem.

Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh only two state in India working against on Media Violence. Maharashtra Media persons and Media Institutions (Prevention of Violence and Damage or Loss to property) Act, 2017 is only special law passed till date in India by any state government whereas Chhattisgarh Govt. also prepared one draft in similar line.

The Maharashtra law provides for a punishment upto 3 years or fine upto Rs 50,000, Act of violence against media person is cognizable now, non-bailable, triable by a first class magistrate (JMFC) and most important investigated by an officer not below the rank of Sub Divisional Police Officer (Dy. SP/ACP).

The Vision Foundation will soon share this report to governments (Union & State) for enacting strong legal frame work to prevent violence against journalists and media workers.

Many international group like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ); Reporters Without Borders (RSF); Freedom House; Article 19 International Federation of Journalists (IFJ); International News Safety Institute (INSI); International Press Institute (IPI); International Freedom of Information Exchange (IFEX) and Global Journalists Security are working in different part of world but India being country of 125 million need many such Organization in country.

The background is a soft-focus collage of journalism-related elements. It includes a hand holding a pen at the top left, a camera lens at the bottom left, and various words like 'JOURNALISM', 'MEDIA', 'TV', 'RIGHTS', 'TRUTH', 'COLUMNS', 'MAGAZINE', 'PUBLICATION', 'JOURNALIST', and 'STAMP' in different fonts and colors. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of yellow, orange, and pink.

THE VISION FOUNDATION

Regd. Office: Plot No 310 A 31 34, Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi -110009

Project Office – B 29, Mansaram Park, Dwarka Mor Metro, Delhi - 110059

Tel: 011-4502398/8587925840 | www.thevisionfoundation.in | thevisionfoundation@yahoo.com