

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF PROTECTING JOURNALISM SOURCES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Women journalists face additional risks in the course of their work – on and offline.

Physical risks confronted by women journalists and sources in the course of confidential communications may require reliance on digital communications.

Excerpt from the upcoming publication “Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age” – part of the UNESCO Series on Internet Freedom

Women journalists face additional risks in the course of their work – on and offline. In the physical realm, these risks can include sexual harassment, physical assault and rape. In the digital sphere, acts of harassment and threats of violence are rampant. Similarly, female sources face increased risks when acting as whistleblowers or confidential informants.

These issues manifest in several ways as regards the issue of source protection in the digital era:

- 1) *Women journalists face greater risks in dealing with confidential sources*
- 2) *Women sources face greater physical risks in encounters with journalists and in revealing confidential information.*
- 3) *The physical risks confronted by women journalists and sources in the course of confidential communications may require reliance on digital communications*
- 4) *Secure digital communications defences, including encryption, are arguably even more necessary for female journalists and sources*

Specific factors for consideration

- 1) *Female journalists and sources need to be able to communicate digitally*

Female journalists working in the context of reporting conflict and organised crime are particularly vulnerable to physical attacks, including sexual assault, and harassment. In some contexts, their physical mobility may be restricted due to overt threats to their safety, or as a result of cultural prohibitions on women’s conduct in public, including meeting privately with male sources. Therefore, women journalists need to be able to rely on secure non-physical means of communication with their sources.

Women sources may face the same physical risks outlined above – especially if their journalistic contact is male and/or they experience cultural restrictions, or they are working in conflict zones.

Partners



Additionally, female confidential sources who are domestic abuse victims may be physically unable to leave their homes, and therefore be reliant on digital communications.

These factors present additional challenges for women journalists and sources, in regard to maintaining confidentiality in the digital era.

2) *Digital safety and security are paramount for both female journalists and sources*

Women journalists need to be able to rely on secure digital communications to ensure that they are not at increased risk in conflict zones, or when working on dangerous stories, such as those about corruption and crime. The ability to covertly intercept and analyse journalistic communications with sources increases the physical risk to both women journalists and their sources in such contexts. Encrypted communications and other defensive measures are therefore of great importance to ensure that their movements are not tracked and the identity of the source remains confidential.

The risks of exposure for confidential sources are magnified for female whistleblowers. Therefore, they need to be able to have access to secure secure digital communications methods to ensure that they are at minimum risk of detection and unmasking. They also need to have confidence in the ability to make secure contact with journalists to ensure that stories affecting women are told – secure digital communications can be an enabler for women’s participation in public interest journalism. They can also help to avoid magnifying the ‘chilling’ of investigative journalism dependent upon female confidential sources. Also needed are strong legal protections for confidentiality, which are applied in a gender-sensitive manner -especially in regard to judicial orders compelling disclosure.

3) *Online harassment and threats*

Journalists and sources using the Internet or mobile apps to communicate face greater risk of gendered harassment and threats of violence. These risks need to be understood and mitigated to avoid further chilling women’s involvement in journalism – as practitioners or sources.

4) *Summary*

Strong source protection laws which respond to the challenges of the digital age discussed at length in this Study can help to avoid the chilling of women’s involvement in investigative journalism that is dependent upon confidential sources. They can assist in empowering women’s participation in accountability reporting that addresses social and development needs, such as systemic failures in public utilities and services, corruption and organised crime.

The research was undertaken for UNESCO by the author Julie Posetti for the World Editors Forum (within the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, WAN-IFRA), with funding from Sweden, and support from the University of Wollongong.

Disclaimer: The opinions and findings are those of the author, and do not commit UNESCO or Sweden.

Strong source protection laws which respond to the challenges of the digital age ... can help to avoid the chilling of women’s involvement in investigative journalism that is dependent upon confidential sources.