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Online Harassment Against Journalists

A Socio-Legal and Working-Life Study of the Challenges and Impacts in Swedish Journalism

Björkenfeldt, Oscar

2024

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Björkenfeldt, O. (2024). *Online Harassment Against Journalists: A Socio-Legal and Working-Life Study of the Challenges and Impacts in Swedish Journalism*. [Doctoral Thesis (compilation), Sociology of Law Department]. Lund University (Media-Tryck).

Total number of authors:

1

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Online Harassment Against Journalists

A Socio-Legal and Working-Life Study of the Challenges and Impacts in Swedish Journalism

OSCAR BJÖRKENFELDT

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY OF LAW | LUND UNIVERSITY



Online Harassment Against Journalists

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A Socio-Legal and Working-Life Study of the Challenges and Impacts in Swedish Journalism

Oscar Björkenfeldt



LUND
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Science at Lund University to be defended on *13 September 2024, at 1:00 p.m. in LUX aula, The Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology, Helgonavägen 3, 223 62 Lund*

Faculty opponent
Professor Tuija Muhonen

Organization: LUND UNIVERSITY, Faculty of Social Sciences

Document name: Doctoral Thesis **Date of issue:** 13 September, 2024

Author(s): Oscar Björkenfeldt **Sponsoring organization:** The Swedish Crime Victim Fund

Title and subtitle: Online Harassment Against Journalists. A Socio-Legal and Working-Life Study of the Challenges and Impacts in Swedish Journalism

Abstract:

Integrating socio-legal analysis and working life science, this compilation thesis aims to enhance the understanding of how the evolving digital landscape—particularly the rise of online harassment— influences journalism and its potential to foster healthy public discourse. Additionally, the thesis seeks to advance the field of socio-legal studies by examining the interplay between digital transformation, shifting norms, and the intersection of informal and formal social controls. Utilizing a triangulated mixed-method approach—comprised of a survey, Twitter data mining, and interviews with media managers—the empirical focus is on exploring the interplay between perceptions of legal conditions, manifestations of online harassment, the consequences of such harassment for journalists, and workplace dynamics in relation to increased external pressure on journalists and news organizations.

The first paper assesses journalists' perspectives on the legal framework's effectiveness against unlawful online harassment, identifying a gap in protection and underscoring the need for enhanced legal resources. However, the empirical data also reveal that online harassment frequently occurs within the realm of the work environment rather than remaining solely a matter for criminal law. The second paper, through a sociopragmatic lens, examines online harassment on Twitter (X), revealing strategies that merge impoliteness, moral discourse, and anti-press rhetoric to negatively influence journalists and challenge professional credibility while also highlighting the paradoxical use of freedom of speech to suppress journalistic expression. The third paper, informed by institutional theory, analyzes how Swedish news organizations manage the psychosocial effects of online harassment, noting a focus on physical safety over mental strain and the need for a more holistic approach to harassment management. The fourth paper synthesizes the three methods to explore self-censorship drivers, offering insights into how news organizations can better handle online harassment and self-censorship, particularly from a psychosocial work environment perspective.

Overall, this thesis emphasizes the challenges facing the legal system and news organizations in addressing systematic efforts to undermine journalism's autonomy through online harassment disguised as free speech. It shows that such disorientation is intertwined with the emergence of new communication norms and the absence of effective (formal and informal) mechanisms for fostering healthy public discourse. It demonstrates that efforts to safeguard these public values—journalists' free speech and, in turn, freedom of information—are largely misdirected, with a heavy focus on criminal law rather than on building a resilient work environment within journalism. Accordingly, the thesis cements online harassment as a work environment issue, illustrating the importance of acknowledging this problem at the intersection of digital transformation, working life, and democratic values.

Key words: anti-press, destructive informal social control, free speech, journalism, online harassment, populism, self-censorship, social control, social, disorientation, Sweden, work environment

Language: English

ISSN and key title: 1403-7246

ISBN: 978-91-8104-133-0 (print), 978-91-8104-134-7 (pdf)

Number of pages: 129

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Paper 4 © by the Authors (Manuscript unpublished)

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Sociology of Law

ISBN 978-91-8104-133-0 (print)

ISBN 978-91-8104-134-7 (pdf)

ISSN 1403-7246

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University

Lund 2024



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MADE IN SWEDEN 

Till min familj - Mamma, Pappa, August och Karin.

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Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Introduktion

I dagens digitala era har sociala medier och internet blivit centrala plattformar för nyhetsförmedling och offentlig debatt. Denna utveckling har främjat snabbare informationsspridning och ökat engagemang i samhällsfrågor. Samtidigt har det också medfört en ökning av negativa påtryckningar i form av trakasserier, hat och allmänt ogillande, särskilt riktade mot journalister. Dessa yrkesverksamma, som spelar en avgörande roll i att informera allmänheten och upprätthålla demokratiska värden, utsätts allt oftare för digitala angrepp och fientliga handlingar online. Detta fenomen utgör inte bara ett personligt angrepp på journalisterna själva utan hotar även yttrandefriheten, den fria pressen och i förlängningen informationsfriheten. Att utforska detta ämne är därför av stor samhällelig betydelse, då det belyser hur näthat kan underminera journalistikens integritet och funktion.

Bakgrund

Tidigare forskning har tydligt visat att näthat, som en sammanfattande term för fenomenet i sig, har en betydande negativ inverkan på journalisters välmående. Många journalister tvingas hantera dessa konsekvenser på egen hand, vilket leder till ytterligare psykisk och emotionell belastning. Även om forskningen på området är begränsad, finns det indikationer på att stödet från både rättsväsendet och arbetsgivare är bristfälligt. Dessutom har det blivit alltmer uppenbart att näthatet mot journalister inte bara är utbrett, utan också systematiskt och präglad av en ambition att tysta vissa perspektiv i den offentliga debatten. Denna systematik är ofta kopplad till en växande populistisk retorik med syftet att underminera traditionell journalistik.

Utifrån denna problembild identifierar avhandlingen ett paradoxalt förhållande gällande rättens funktion i att mildra de negativa effekterna av näthat mot journalister. Denna paradox understryker dilemmat att samtidigt som näthat mot journalister kan hämma deras yttrandefrihet och påverka pressfriheten samt tillgången till information, kan potentiella statliga ingripanden för att motverka denna utveckling närma sig censur och därmed utmana demokratiska principer.

Syfte och Metoder

Denna avhandling syftar till att öka förståelsen för hur det snabbt föränderliga digitala samhället, särskilt ökningen av näthat, påverkar journalistiken och dess potentiella konsekvenser för att främja en sund offentlig debatt.

Avhandlingen belyser också hur det digitala medielandskapet, nya kommunikationsverktyg och den ökade fientligheten mot traditionell journalistik skapar dubbla utmaningar: de försvårar rättsväsendets och lagens möjligheter att ingripa, samtidigt som de fungerar som en unik form av destruktiv social kontroll över journalisters beteende som ofta undgår rättssystemet.

För att uppfylla avhandlingens syfte användes tre olika metoder som fördelades över fyra artiklar. Dessa metoder inkluderade:

- (1) En enkätundersökning genomförd i samarbete med Svenska Journalistförbundet.
- (2) En tematisk diskursanalys och lingvistisk analys av kränkande tweets riktade mot svenska journalister.
- (3) Intervjuer med 14 mediechefer från olika svenska nyhetsorganisationer.

Forskningsdesignen kännetecknades av en abduktiv forskningsstrategi, vilket innebär ett systematiskt och kontinuerligt samspel mellan teori och data. Med andra ord användes ett empiriskt förhållningssätt där resultaten från varje artikel informerade fokuset för nästa artikel, vilket i sin tur påverkade valet av teori. Denna process ledde avhandlingen mot ett särskilt fokus på arbetslivsforskning.

Huvudsakliga Resultat

Avhandlingens resultat bör ses i ljuset av denna dynamiska process. För det första visar den hur journalister ofta upplever att rättssystemet förminskar allvaret i olagliga former av näthat och hur detta negativt påverkar deras förtroende för juridiskt skydd (Artikel I). Problemet ligger inte främst i lagstiftningen i sig, utan i en stigmatiserande kultur som nedvärderar allvaret i näthat både inom journalistyrket och rättssystemet. Detta skapar en ond cirkel där trakasserier normaliseras och hanteras otillräckligt, vilket leder till en utbredd känsla av osäkerhet och hjälplöshet bland journalister.

På samma sätt framgår det i Artikel I att näthat ofta faller utanför den straffrättsliga ramen, vilket gör att rättssystemet har svårt att hantera problemet eftersom det främst är utformat för att hantera tydliga överträdelser där en individ direkt skadar en annan. Utmaningen ligger istället i att skydda grundläggande värden från den destruktiva användningen av yttrandefrihet för att tysta pressen. Det straffrättsliga systemet har svårt att hantera detta eftersom

det går bortom konventionella föreställningar om individuella skador och i stället riktar sig mot ett offentligt värde.

Baserat på iakttagelserna i Artikel I, undersöker Artikel II språket i kränkande och förolämpande tweets mot journalister för att fördjupa förståelsen av hur näthat kan användas som ett systematiskt påtryckningsmedel inom ramarna för yttrandefriheten. Artikeln bekräftar att en stor majoritet av tweetsen innehåller förolämpningar snarare än direkta hot. Vidare framkommer det en nära koppling till populistisk och anti-press retorik i materialet. Med andra ord används näthat som en strategi för att undergräva traditionell journalistik i Sverige. Detta fenomen speglar en bredare trend av misstro mot mainstream-media, liknande den utveckling som ses i andra länder. Genom att introducera begreppet DISK (Destruktiv informell Social Kontroll) betonar avhandlingen hur näthat används för att skapa en atmosfär av rädsla och osäkerhet bland journalister.

Resultaten från Artikel I och II visar att näthat mot journalister ofta formuleras på ett sätt som undviker de juridiska kriterierna för straffrättsliga åtgärder men som ändå har en betydande påverkan på journalisternas arbetsmiljö och därmed tydligare faller inom arbetsgivarnas arbetsmiljöansvar. Baserat på dessa resultat undersöker Artikel III hur mediechefer, med ansvar för arbetsmiljön, förstår och hanterar arbetsrelaterade utmaningar som härrör från näthat riktat mot deras journalister. Artikeln understryker att mediechefer tenderar att se näthat som ett fysiskt arbetsmiljöproblem där åtgärder är starkt kopplade till huruvida näthatet uttrycks på ett sätt som kan anses olagligt i straffrättslig mening. De psykosociala skadorna erkänns därmed inte som ett legitimt organisatoriskt problem. Detta synsätt bidrar till att journalister förväntas hantera näthat på egen hand, då det ses som en naturlig del av deras jobb. Detta leder till att nyhetsorganisationer inte har tillämpat ett systematiskt arbetsmiljöarbete för att motverka de negativa konsekvenserna av utsatthet för näthat. Mer specifikt visar artikeln hur institutionalisering inom professionen genererar normer och värderingar som hindrar anpassningen till de arbetsrelaterade utmaningar som näthat innebär.

Slutligen belyser Artikel IV själv censur bland svenska journalister, baserat på enkätdata. Resultaten visar att en betydande andel journalister—37,3 % undviker att rapportera och 48,1 % anpassar sin rapportering—praktiserar själv censur för att undvika näthat eller hot. Vidare indikerar artikeln att rädsla, orsakad av de negativa hälsoeffekterna av näthat, är en drivande faktor bakom journalisters själv censur. Bland de tillfrågade journalisterna har sammanlagt 18 % upplevt negativa hälsoeffekter på grund av näthat. Noterbart är att 72,3

% av de journalister som upplever negativa hälsoeffekter anpassar sin rapportering.

Studien avslöjar också att journalister inte tar hänsyn till sociala influenser från personer i deras omgivning när det gäller huruvida de anpassar sin rapportering vid utsatthet för näthat. Utöver den starka influensen av negativa hälsoeffekter kopplat till själv censur, visar resultaten att journalisters beslut att censurera sig själva främst påverkas av personliga strategier och individuella egenskaper - såsom känslomässiga reaktioner på negativ feedback och individuell motståndskraft - snarare än av yttre sociala influenser. Artikeln visade även att ett högre förtroende för rättsväsendets och arbetsgivares förmåga att erbjuda skydd och stöd minskade journalisters benägenhet till själv censur. Detta samband var emellertid relativt svagt, vilket tyder på att det befintliga stödet är bristfälligt.

Dessa resultat, satta i relation till övriga artiklar i avhandlingen, tyder på en snedvridning inom nyhetsorganisationer, där man tenderar att prioritera individer som är motståndskraftiga mot näthat, vilket riskerar att marginalisera de som påverkas mer av dessa påtryckningar. Detta återspeglar ett bredare branschproblem där uthållighet värderas högre än att åtgärda de bakomliggande orsakerna och effekterna av trakasserier. Artikeln hävdar att detta kan leda till en homogenisering av journalistiska röster, vilket prioriterar tuffhet över mångfald och potentiellt påverkar kvaliteten på journalistiken.

Sammanfattning

För att sätta de huvudsakliga resultaten och slutsatserna i relation till studiens syfte, fördjupar denna avhandling förståelsen av hur den snabbt föränderliga digitala världen, särskilt ökningen av näthat, påverkar journalistiken och utgör ett verkligt hot mot den fria offentliga debatten. Avhandlingen fastställer specifikt de negativa effekterna av näthat på journalistik i termer av hälsoeffekter och själv censur. Den ramar in detta som ett arbetsmiljöproblem och betonar att mycket av det näthat som journalister utsätts för faller utanför straffrättens ramar. Avhandlingen framhäver att journalistiska organisationer inte har anpassat sig till dessa utmaningar tillräckligt, och har misslyckats med att implementera ett systematiskt angreppssätt för att hantera de arbetsmiljöproblem som uppstår. Dessutom visar den på vikten av att utveckla sådana arbetsmiljöåtgärder, med tanke på de samordnade, ideologiskt och moraliskt drivna attackerna på professionell journalistik och de alarmerande nivåerna av själv censur på grund av näthat. Enkelt uttryckt visar avhandlingen att fenomenet med att underminera journalistiken i Sverige inte är slumpmässigt och inte kommer att försvinna inom en snar framtid. Utan

proaktiva åtgärder kommer det ihållande hatet att fortsätta undergräva journalistiken.

Praktiska Tillämpningar

Det finns flera möjligheter för praktisk tillämpning av resultaten från denna avhandling, relevanta för beslutsfattare, arbetsgivare och journalister. När det gäller policy och juridisk relevans understryker resultaten behovet av att erkänna näthat som en arbetsmiljöfråga som underminerar journalistisk autonomi och offentlig debatt, samt att större fokus bör läggas på strategier för att förbättra journalisternas arbetsmiljö. Rättsväsendet bör också ta olagliga former av näthat på större allvar för att stärka journalisternas förtroende för juridiskt skydd. Detta är av särskild vikt eftersom avhandlingen visar att systematiska påtryckningar i form av näthat effektivt leder till självzensur, vilket i sin tur kan påverka den allmänna diskursen i en viss riktning.

Avhandlingen visar att nyhetsorganisationer ofta hanterar näthat som en säkerhetsfråga, definierad av laglighet. För att stärka motståndskraften inom yrket behövs ett ökat fokus på att skapa praktiker och lösningar som främjar både fysisk säkerhet och psykiskt välbefinnande. Nyhetsorganisationer kan uppnå detta genom att anta en mer holistisk strategi som inkluderar psykologiskt stöd, robusta rapporteringsmekanismer och utbildningsprogram.

Mot bakgrund av de normativa och kulturella hinder som lyfts fram i Artikel III, måste nyhetsorganisationer aktivt och systematiskt implementera omfattande stödsystem för att hantera de psykologiska effekterna av näthat. Även om det finns resurser för mental hälsa på de flesta nyhetsorganisationer, är användningen låg på grund av stigmatiseringen kring att använda dessa i samband med näthat. Därför behöver mental rådgivning och stresshanteringsprogram uppmuntras mer.

Det är också viktigt att utveckla organisatoriska policys som explicit erkänner och adresserar näthat som en arbetsmiljöfråga. Dessa policys bör inkludera tydliga procedurer för att rapportera och hantera incidenter, skydd mot repressalier och regelbundna utbildningar för att lära personal och ledning att känna igen och hantera näthat och dess negativa effekter. Att skapa en stödjande arbetskultur är avgörande, där journalister känner sig stöttade av sina kollegor och överordnade. Detta kan avsevärt minska effekterna av trakasserier. Som framgår i Artikel IV är sådana stödsystem ofta dåligt anpassade till näthatets karaktär, vilket leder till att journalister som drabbas av näthat tenderar att självzensurera sig. Därför finns ett behov av att främja öppen kommunikation, erbjuda nätverk för kamratstöd och säkerställa att ledningen tar trakasserirapporter på allvar och agerar snabbt.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the research participants who generously shared their time and experiences with me. Without your contributions, this work would not have been possible. My heartfelt thanks also go to the gatekeepers who facilitated my access to the research sites and participants. Your support and cooperation were crucial in enabling this research.

My sincerest thanks go to my main supervisor. Without you, Måns Svensson, I would never have had the courage or self-confidence to undertake this PhD project. Your professional competence goes without saying, but your ability to help people grow deserves special recognition. You have believed in me far more than I have believed in myself. Feeling that support has made a huge difference. I have never felt lonely, and when panic and self-doubt set in, you have always calmed me down with the right words. Jag tror inte du förstår hur stor min tacksamhet är för din handledning, vänskap, ärlighet och uppmuntran. Från djupet av mitt hjärta, tack!

I am furthermore deeply thankful for the support and help from competent co-supervisors. Linnea Gustafsson, writing my second article with you was a joyful process that provided practical insight into why research is better and much more enjoyable when done collaboratively. You are not only an excellent researcher but also a very pleasant person to be around. Rustamjon Urinboyev, you stepped in as a supervisor during difficult circumstances and did not disappoint. I have never met a more efficient person, and your assistance and comments in the final stage of my work were exactly what I needed. Thank you both!

Special gratitude goes to Karl Dahlstrand, who sadly passed away at the end of 2023. I will not primarily remember you as my supervisor, but for your fun and unique personality. Our conversations about music and life in general were delightful. Jag saknar dig och önskar så mycket att du kunde vara med på min disputationfest. Additionally, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my co-supervisor Reza Banakar, who passed away at the beginning of my PhD journey. Your early guidance and inspirational teaching during my master's studies laid a strong foundation for my work.

I also wish to express my appreciation and thanks to my start, midway, and final seminar discussants: Nicolás Serrano Cardona, Amin Parsa, Marie Leth-Espensen, Martin Berg, Anna Lundberg, and Sara Svensson. Your valuable

feedback and insightful comments have greatly contributed to the development and improvement of my research.

My heartfelt gratitude extends to my colleagues in the department, especially my fellow PhD colleagues. Your camaraderie, support, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this journey. The "core" group of motley characters—John Woodlock, Cansu Bostan, Marie Leth-Espensen, and Nicolás Serrano Cardona—has meant a great deal to me. From endless conversations with John, Cansu's bad influence on my nicotine intake, Marie's warmth and kindness, to the laughter and confused appearance of Nico - thank you! I will miss our dynamic. Another person hard to forget is Davor Vuleta. I have not yet decided if I was lucky or unlucky to share office space with you, but one thing is certain: it was always a blast when you came to Lund. The same goes for Martin Joorman and Peter Bergwall, who always makes me smile when we meet. To all three of you, thank you for your generosity and humor.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the new group of PhD students—Heraclitos Muhire, Carlo Nicoli Aldini, Embla Helle Nerland, Timothy York, Tolibjon Mustafoev, Lisa Schmitz, and Sophia Zisakou—for bringing fresh perspectives and enthusiasm that have energized and inspired the department. On a similar note, the Sociology of Law department as a whole has been my academic home since the end of my bachelor studies. To former teachers who became colleagues, administrative staff, and higher management, I appreciate the valuable discussions and cherished memories we shared over the years.

Beyond the academic environment, there are many people who have always been there to take my mind off research and direct it toward more fun and, to be honest, healthier thoughts. My dear friends whom I value so incredibly much - there is no need to mention you by names - tack för att ni finns och alltid ställer upp. To Anna, my partner for the larger part of this journey: Tack för alla fina stunder och för att du alltid har brytt dig om mig.

Sist men inte minst, till min familj, till vilken jag dedikerar denna avhandling. Er obegränsade och villkorslösa stöttning och värme tar jag ibland för given. Den finns alltid där men blir som tydligast i skarpt läge. Min tacksamhet för er finner inga gränser. Som du brukar säga, mamma, det är en kärlek så stor att det gör ont. Förhoppningsvis kommer jag vara lite roligare att umgås med nu när detta är avklarat. Ni är bäst och jag älskar er!

Oscar Björkenfeldt

Malmö, July 2024

List of Papers

Paper I

Björkenfeldt, O (2023) Swedish journalists' perceptions of legal protection against unlawful online harassment. *Front. Sociol.* 8:1154495. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2023.1154495

Paper II

Björkenfeldt, O, and Gustafsson, L. (2023) "Impoliteness and morality as instruments of destructive informal social control in online harassment targeting Swedish journalists." *Language & Communication* 93: 172–187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2023.11.002>

Paper III

Björkenfeldt, O. (2023). Addressing Online Harassment in Swedish Journalism: An Institutional Perspective on Management. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.18291/njwls.141842>

Paper IV

Björkenfeldt, O. (2024). "Resilience and Self-Censorship Among Journalists Facing Online Harassment" *Digital Journalism* (Submission unpublished manuscript)

Introduction

An excerpt from an interview conducted as part of this thesis with a journalist at SVT, Sweden's national public TV broadcaster, highlights the sense of helplessness and inadequate support structures faced by journalists subjected to online harassment. It underscores the underlying uncertainty of technological and cultural changes associated with two distinct—but interrelated—issues: a new kind of workplace problem and a threat to journalistic freedoms in well-established democracies such as Sweden.

Interviewer: Have you had any contact with the legal system, meaning with the police or prosecutors?

Respondent: No, no.

Interviewer: Never?

Respondent: No. All my contacts are handled through SVT's security department. They advise me not to take the subway alone. But, you know, how should I solve that? It's not like I can take a taxi at SVT's expense whenever I want. I live with the feeling that if something is going to happen, it will happen. When I leave the Aktuellt studio at SVT around 10:00 PM, it's usually dark, empty, and without guards. Anyone could easily wait on a moped, shoot me, and leave. I do feel unprotected, I must admit.

Interviewer: Do you feel the legal system supports you?

Respondent: No, I don't even think about it. Like when there was that post on Twitter saying I should be met with blunt violence. Someone, my daughter even, suggested I should report it. But I thought, why? What would it lead to? [...] SVT's lawyers have told me that freedom of speech is constitutionally protected and very broad. Basically, anyone can say almost anything about me without it leading to any legal action.

[...]

Respondent: Regarding my employer... The most common reaction I get from them is that they furrow their brows and say, "What can we do for you?" And then... then I just get furious [...]...But I... I feel like they are floundering. They don't know, and THEY JUST DON'T GRASP THE EXTENT! Sometimes I amuse myself by sending them the worst emails, and then they just..."Oooh, aah, that's terrible, oooh God." "The fact that people take the time to write such atrocities..." But I don't think anyone really understands how it feels to...I feel so humiliated, so dishonored, so dismissed as a person, as a professional. And I don't remember when this became part of my employment contract. When did I ever agree that this should be part of my everyday work environment?"

(Extract from interview with a female journalist)

The insights from the experienced female journalist highlight three pivotal aspects of this study. The first aspect underscores the failure of the legal system to effectively address online harassment against journalists. The respondent's indifference towards the legal system as a supportive mechanism, along with her stoic acceptance of potential threats ("if something happens, it happens"), casts light on a common perception of the law as ineffective and inaccessible. The subtle nature of online harassment itself compounds this issue. Often, such harassment is articulated in a manner that precariously straddles the boundary of free speech, making it challenging to classify strictly within the confines of criminal law—as articulated to her by SVT's in-house lawyers. This ambiguity challenges the capacity of legal frameworks to adequately respond to the specific challenges of online harassment.

Secondly, the interview highlights the psychological toll of online harassment and employers' inadequate recognition and response. Employers often diminish the gravity of the harassment, treating it as a mere personal challenge for the journalist to overcome independently, and fail to grasp the systemic and recurring nature of the harassment. This dismissive attitude overlooks the emotional and psychological impacts and reflects a broader, systemic organizational issue in many media environments. These environments are often inadequately prepared to comprehend and address the psychosocial aspects of online harassment from individuals outside the workplace; aspects which are more difficult to discern clearly than physical harassment or workplace violence. Thus, her experience highlights the broader organizational and societal dynamics faced by journalists today, emphasizing the need for a proactive organizational approach to addressing online harassment.

Finally, although not explicitly mentioned in the interview excerpt, the widespread nature of this issue transcends regulatory, organizational, and individual concerns, with potential implications for the health of democracy. These implications have been dramatically amplified in the digital age, marked by increased and politically motivated attempts to undermine journalists' credibility. Digitalization and social media have transformed communication landscapes, making journalism increasingly vulnerable. The ease of access to journalists through these platforms heightens their exposure to online harassment and magnifies its impact. This increased risk threatens to suppress and silence voices in the media. The erosion of journalistic freedom and safety, which are crucial for the dissemination of impartial and diverse information, directly undermines freedom of information—a fundamental pillar of democratic participation and public awareness.

This broader context is essential for understanding the full scope of the challenges discussed. While the elements identified through the interview excerpt—the legal system's inadequacy, the psychological impact of online harassment, the lack of a systematic approach by news organizations to address such workplace hazards, and the potential societal implications for democracy—may seem distinct, their intersection warrants scientific acknowledgment, especially when it comes to understanding contemporary efforts to undermine the credibility of traditional media. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis is unique in its integrative approach, weaving together these strands to present a holistic understanding of online harassment against journalists.

Viewed through a socio-legal lens, this thesis acknowledges that journalists often navigate a gray area. On one hand, they increasingly fall prey to adverse and harassing pressure from individuals outside their workplace. This harassment predominantly occurs under the guise of 'free speech', making it challenging for the criminal law system to recognize their status as crime victims. On the other hand, they simultaneously suffer from inadequate workplace environments. Current workplace measures fail to adequately address the psychosocial consequences of non-physical violence, leaving journalists ill-equipped to handle the realities they are facing. This aspect becomes particularly relevant from a working life research perspective, highlighting the ongoing 'workplace in transition' driven by digitalization and its new challenges. Moreover, while there has been an increase in scientific interest in online harassment of journalists, as well as in other professions such as academics and politicians, the implications for working life have not been thoroughly addressed and therefore remain largely overlooked in the field of working life research.

This interdisciplinary perspective demonstrates how socio-legal studies and working life research can expand their traditional scopes and, in doing so, deepen our understanding of this societal and democratic issue. More specifically, the openness and flexibility of socio-legal studies and working life research enable an approach that examines law and working conditions from a broad social-scientific perspective. In socio-legal studies, law is not just seen as a set of rules and statutes but as a dynamic and evolving system deeply embedded in everyday social interactions and practices (Banakar, 2015). Similarly, working life research explores workplace dynamics beyond formal structures, including social interactions, cultural norms, and power relations that shape employees' daily experiences (Hvid et al., 2011). Thus, the fusion of socio-legal studies and working life research offers a rich, multi-dimensional perspective.

Furthermore, and of central importance to this thesis, is the sociological influence exerted by both socio-legal and working life research, which opens up a distinct socio-political avenue for viewing online harassment. This thesis situates online harassment not merely as a form of adverse pressure but as an active component of the ideologically driven anti-press movement gaining traction in Sweden and other Western countries. Often operating within the realm of free speech, as mentioned, this form of harassment diverges from media criticism that recognizes the news media as an epistemic authority and strives to elevate journalistic standards through accountability mechanisms (Carlson, 2009). Instead, it encompasses a distinct form of “delegitimizing media criticism” that strategically aims to erode the media’s epistemic credibility and shape public sentiment (Waisbord and Amado, 2017; Farhall et al., 2019; Solis and Sagarzazu, 2020). Waisbord (2020) characterizes this as ‘mob censorship’—a form of grassroots vigilantism falling within the bounds of legal free speech, aimed at disciplining and silencing journalists. Through an integrated socio-legal and working life framework, we can understand this phenomenon as not just an issue of individual harassment but as a reflection of larger sociopolitical dynamics affecting journalism as a profession.

Keeping the central aspect of online harassment against journalists outlined above in mind, this PhD project delves deeper into various dimensions of this issue through four articles. Each article contributes a unique perspective, enriching our understanding of the problem and its wider implications.

Research Aim and Questions

This thesis aims to enhance understanding of how the evolving digital landscape—particularly the rise of online harassment—influences journalism and its potential repercussions for fostering healthy public discourse. In parallel, the thesis also seeks to advance the field of socio-legal studies by dissecting the interplay between digital transformation, shifting norms, and the intersection of formal and informal social controls. Accordingly, it acknowledges that the digital media landscape, communicative technologies, and increased hostility towards mainstream journalism present dual challenges: they complicate law enforcement and legal responses on the one hand, and, on the other, exact a unique form of social control over journalists' behavior that largely eludes the legal system. This phenomenon represents a form of social organization driven by social, technological, and cultural changes, which further undermine more traditional mechanisms of social control. Such a paradigm shift requires nuanced understanding to safeguard the autonomy of independent journalism and, consequently, the freedom of information in society. Here, the field of socio-legal studies has the potential to play a vital role in enhancing understanding and addressing these challenges, highlighting the importance of adapting legal and social systems to new realities.

To meet these overarching research aims, the following research questions guided the papers:

How do Swedish journalists perceive legal conditions in the event of online harassment? (Paper I)

What are the predominant types of impoliteness used against Swedish journalists on Twitter, and in what manner do they act as instruments of harm and restraint? (Paper II)

How do impoliteness and morality interplay as discursive mechanisms for exerting destructive informal social control over Swedish journalists on Twitter? (Paper II)

In the pursuit of a healthy psychosocial work environment, how do Swedish media managers understand and respond to work-related

challenges stemming from online harassment targeting their journalists? (Paper III)

What factors contribute to journalists resisting self-censorship in response to online harassment? (Paper IV)

What factors lead journalists to engage in self-censorship due to online harassment? (Paper IV)

Together, by employing a multifaceted research design that combines theoretical and methodological triangulation, these papers collectively articulate a convergent strategy for fulfilling the overarching aim of the research through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This includes (1) a survey among Swedish journalists (used in articles I and IV), (2) an analysis of online harassment incidents targeting journalists on Twitter¹ (used in article II), and (3) an interview study with media managers (used in article III).

Each paper addresses a different aspect of online harassment. The first paper examines journalists' perceptions of the judicial framework in addressing online harassment, revealing a protection gap and the need for enhanced legal resources. It also indicates that such harassment is often more related to workplace environment concerns than to criminal law issues. The second paper shifts the focus to the socio-pragmatic aspects of online harassment, showing how it is used on Twitter as part of populist and anti-press rhetoric, serving as a form of destructive informal social control over Swedish journalists. This form of harassment is often masked as free speech, complicating the response to it.

The third paper, grounded in neo-institutional theory, explores barriers within the journalism industry that hinder the effective handling of online harassment. It highlights a tendency to prioritize physical safety over mental well-being, suggesting the need for a more holistic approach to managing harassment. Finally, the fourth paper delves into the factors that contribute to resilience against self-censorship induced by online harassment, as well as the factors that exacerbate it, leading to withdrawal and reluctance among journalists. The findings reveal that self-censorship is predominantly driven by individual factors such as perceptions of fear, personal health concerns, and emotional

¹ In 2023, Twitter rebranded itself as X. However, for clarity and consistency, I will use the term "Twitter" throughout this thesis to refer to the platform.

reactions to negative feedback. Institutional support, such as legal safeguards and employer backing, has a positive but weak effect on resisting self-censorship.

The Research Project

After outlining the central scientific themes of this thesis, its research objectives, and the questions crafted to achieve these objectives, I would like to dedicate a few words to the research project within which this thesis has been conducted. Named '*Hot och hat mot journalister*', this project is funded by the Swedish Crime Victim Fund and led by Professor Måns Svensson, who has also served as my supervisor. Additionally, several collaborations within the project have been key in carrying out this research. These collaborations include:

- **The Swedish Union of Journalism:** The Swedish Union of Journalism has played a key role in distributing the survey and has also actively participated in discussions about the project since its inception.
- **Utgivarna:** Robert Olsson, the former CEO of Utgivarna—an association for Swedish publishers, including the Newspaper Publishers Association, Sweden's Magazines, Swedish Television, Swedish Radio, the Educational Broadcasting Company, and TV4—has been instrumental in gaining access to the respondents for the interview study. Given the high profile of many respondents, establishing these contacts would have been exceedingly difficult without Utgivarna's gatekeeping assistance.
- **Språkbanken Text:** Språkbanken Text, a research infrastructure for language data and a language technology research unit associated with the Department of Swedish, Multilingualism, and Language Technology at the University of Gothenburg, has assisted in collecting Twitter data. Peter Ljunglöf, in collaboration with Professor Svensson and me, designed and trained the machine learning model and managed data collection.
- **Media & Democracy:** Media & Democracy is a national collaboration platform for media innovation and social research. Its mission is to strengthen media innovation, journalism, public discourse, and democracy. This research project has taken part in roundtable discussions organized by Media & Democracy involving prominent journalist organizations in Sweden and Swedish universities. Additionally, this

collaboration initiative has engaged with the Swedish government, aiming to establish a sustainable infrastructure for research and foster collaboration between research institutions and journalistic organizations to promote public debate.

The collaborations within this project and thesis have enhanced both its academic and practical contributions. By engaging with various organizations, the research has benefited from a wealth of expertise and resources that have broadened its analytical frameworks and deepened its empirical investigations. These partnerships have ensured access to unique datasets and specialized knowledge, thereby strengthening the thesis's relevance.

Although the four articles presented in this thesis represent the project's main research output, the results have also been disseminated through several other outlets beyond academic peer-reviewed articles. Both Professor Svensson and I have participated in panel discussions and seminars throughout the project. This includes participation in Almedalsveckan, public panel discussions arranged by Reporters without Borders, Kulturverkstaden, Svenska Biblioteksföreringen, the Gothenburg Book Fair (Bokmässan), and as keynote speakers at the Swedish Crime Victim Authority conference "International Day of Victims of Crime" on two occasions, to name just a few. In addition, I have presented my research to a newly established collaboration group at SVT that focuses on developing enhanced strategies for managing threats and harassment. I also maintain ongoing communication with this group.

The project was also involved in the Government Official Reports from the Ministry of Justice (SOU 2022:2), investigating the potential for a Sharpened View on Crimes Against Journalists and Practitioners of Certain Socially Beneficial Functions. Here, the project contributed a summary of the survey results and participated in discussions with the principal investigators. This investigation later led to an enhancement of legal penalties, providing stronger protection for journalists and news professionals, implemented by the Swedish government in August 2023.

Moreover, the project has been involved in the government's assignment to the Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority to prepare an information campaign against online hate related to democratic participation and involvement (Ku2020/01463/MD). Within this government assignment, the research project conducted four studies on the behavior of the Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority: (1) a systematic literature review of English-language scientific and peer-reviewed literature focused on online hate and democracy; (2) a bibliometric analysis of the literature identified

through the systematic literature review; (3) a more unstructured knowledge overview, based on keyword searches for Swedish-language inquiries, reports, and similar materials, known as ‘grey’ literature; and (4) a survey study targeting a nationally representative sample of residents in Sweden aged 16 and older to investigate the impact of online harassment on democratic discourse. These studies were published in two reports: one encompassing the literature reviews and bibliometric analysis (Svensson et.al., 2021), and a brief report from the survey study (Brottsoffermyndigheten, 2021).

In summary, the project has extended the reach of this thesis's findings and served as a foundational platform for the development and realization of the entire research effort. Although I am the sole author of the thesis and most of the articles within it, the collective and collaborative nature of the research project has been crucial. Likewise, my relationship with Professor Svensson, who has served both as the project leader and my supervisor, has been instrumental in the development and execution of the research.

An Abductive and Interdisciplinary Approach

An astute reader may have already noticed that this thesis is shaped by an abductive interplay between empirical findings, methods, and theory. It is important to acknowledge that no research begins in a social vacuum; instead, it is continually influenced by the academic perspective of the researcher. This research is no exception. The initial idea for this thesis can be traced to my background in sociology and socio-legal studies, and the research project of which this thesis is a part. Specifically, the starting point for this research originated from a socio-legal observation of a paradox in free speech identified by me and Professor Svensson, which was a key factor in formulating the research problem for the funding application to the Swedish Crime Victim Authority.

This paradox underscores the dilemma that, while online harassment of journalists may inhibit their free expression and impact press freedom and information access, potential state interventions to counter such harassment could verge on censorship, thereby challenging democratic principles. In keeping with socio-legal research traditions, social scientific research techniques and interpretations through interdisciplinary explanatory frameworks (Banakar, 2015) have been utilized to navigate this legal paradox. This approach has steered this thesis into the realm of working life research.

Essentially, this perspective has evolved through a dynamic interplay between empirical findings and theoretical insights throughout the research process; this will be explained in more detail in the methodological chapter.

Working life research, like socio-legal research, encompasses numerous fields and disciplines, exploring changes in work and their impact on qualifications, health, innovation, the economy, identity, social orientation, and culture (Hvid and Falkum, 2019). Nordic countries are well-known for their contributions to working life research and have a long tradition of investigating and enhancing modern working life, considering factors such as health, qualifications, and culture (e.g., Ryberg and Bruun 1996; Hvid et al. 2011; Kasvio, Gonäs, and Skorstad 2012; Hasle and Sørensen 2013; Jacobsen et al. 2013; Karlsson 2013; Torp and Vinje 2014; Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault 2017; Buch 2019; Torp and Reiersen 2020).

While the term "working life research" is used in this thesis, it's important to note that different terms are employed for similar types of research. One such field is Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) research, which focuses on evaluating intervention effectiveness, translating research into practice, understanding the health effects of job conditions, identifying research priorities for worker safety, and developing hazard prevention and control strategies to improve worker health (e.g., Rosenstock 1997; Rosenstock, Olenec, and Wagner 1998; Goldenhar et al. 2001; Lamontagne 2003; MacEachen and Kosny 2016; Lourdes Cecilia Ruiz Salvador and Duong Van Thinh 2016; Schulte et al. 2017; Gagliardi et al. 2017; Miller et al. 2020). Another relevant field is the sociology of work, which examines the implications of work and employment within societies, exploring how work affects and is influenced by social structures, cultural norms, and economic systems. This field also addresses the meaning of work, the balance between work and personal life, and the evolution of work practices over time (e.g., Abramo 1998; Cornfield and Hodson 2002; Strangleman 2008; Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2009; Bandelj 2009; Watson 2009; Scott 2014; Furåker 2018;).

The intersection between socio-legal analysis and working life research in this thesis addresses the work–life aspects of online harassment targeting journalists, while also considering organizational dynamics, sociopolitical developments, and legal issues related to this emerging problem. Moreover, although not explicitly labeled as such, this thesis is also relevant to academic fields closely aligned with journalism, such as journalism research and media and communication studies, which have also recognized online harassment as a significant concern in recent years (e.g., Chen et al. 2020; Kantola and Harju 2021; K. C. Miller and Lewis 2020; Koirala 2020; Lewis, Zamith, and

Coddington 2020; K. C. Miller 2021; Deavours et al. 2022; Uwalaka et al. 2023).

Contextual Background

This section provides a contextual background by presenting key themes underpinning the research. Although much of this literature is addressed in the four articles included in this thesis, the following exposition offers a deeper and more coherent frame of reference for the scope of this thesis, better suited to the format of the dissertation. It begins with an outline of the professional characteristics of journalism, followed by a note on how legal aspects are acknowledged in the thesis. It then clarifies the concept of online harassment and how it is applicable to the journalistic field. Thereafter, the section situates the Swedish media landscape within broader global trends in journalist harassment. Finally, it discusses the literature on the effects of online harassment on journalists, their coping mechanisms, and how news organizations are currently addressing these challenges.

The journalistic profession

The journalistic profession is characterized by an interplay between traditional professional standards and the unique demands of the media landscape. It is a field that, on one hand, grapples with its professional identity, balancing autonomy, ethical standards, and public service against the pressures of market forces and technological changes (e.g., Banderov, Simkacheva, and Shakirov 2016; Mellado 2019; Vos 2019; Riedl 2021). On the other hand, it adheres to a shared commitment to core values such as truth, validation, and shared reality (Plaisance and Deppa 2009; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016; McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour 2018). Thus, although journalism may not meet all the criteria of a traditional profession, it occupies a unique place in society, with its practitioners serving as gatekeepers of information. However, the professionalization of journalism remains a subject of debate, influenced by historical, regional, and societal factors.

This debate extends into the realm of journalism's fundamental role as a democratic watchdog in society. Here, the analysis of media systems often intersects with political systems, particularly when exploring how these systems shape and reflect the dynamics of governance. In 'Comparing Media

Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics,' Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) present a comparative framework that delineates three distinct media system models. These models elucidate variations in professionalism, state involvement, and political alignment across different cultural and political contexts, as summarized below:

- **Liberal Model:** This model features a commercialized, privately-owned media industry that upholds high standards of professionalism and objectivity, operating independently from government interference in a competitive market.
- **Democratic Corporatist Model:** Combining commercial and political influences, this model maintains high journalistic professionalism and includes media ownership across private and public entities, with the state playing a regulatory but freedom-respecting role.
- **Polarized Pluralist Model:** Characterized by media organizations with explicit political affiliations and lower journalistic professionalism, this model exhibits significant state influence over a less commercialized media landscape that closely interacts with political power structures.

The Swedish media system, characterized by the democratic–corporatist model, boasts a robust public service sector alongside a trusted commercial media sector, both enjoying high public confidence. Journalism in Sweden is distinguished by a historical commitment to freedom of information, adhering to both liberal and social responsibility principles (Nord 2007). However, the system is currently transitioning towards a neoliberal media welfare state, marked by increased polarization in media usage and challenges posed by alternative media outlets (Larsson 2012; Jakobsson, Lindell, and Stiernstedt 2021; Holt 2018). It is important to note that this thesis exclusively focuses on mainstream media outlets, which adhere to more rigorous professional standards than their alternative counterparts.

Understanding media systems and their connections to political structures is key to contextualizing journalism within a broader societal framework. However, it's equally important to recognize that the journalism profession has its own distinct cultures. A notable contribution to this discussion comes from Deuze (2005), who conceptualizes journalism as a professional ideology. According to Deuze, journalism, as it relates to how journalists derive meaning from their work, can be understood as a system of beliefs that encompasses the values and practices that define the profession. He suggests that journalists in democratic societies share similar characteristics and values, applying them in varied ways to find meaning in their work.

Similarly, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) discuss the discourse around journalistic roles. They contend that these roles, as structures of meaning, set the parameters for what is considered desirable within a given institutional context. These roles are subject to ongoing discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation. In other words, the discourse around journalistic roles is central to where journalistic culture is reproduced and challenged. It also serves as a space where dominant narratives in journalism are criticized and legitimized as institutional norms and practices (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003). Thus, institutional roles perform a double function—they provide institutional legitimacy relative to broader society, and through the socialization process, they shape the cognitive framework journalists use to understand their work (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). However, as Hanitzsch and Vos (2017; 2018) argue, given the hierarchy of societal values inherent in normative roles, some journalistic roles carry more discursive weight than others. Indeed, some roles—such as those that focus on everyday life—tend to be under-articulated, highlighting the uneven distribution of power within journalistic discourse.

Consequently, despite the numerous differences in norms and values that preclude a universal occupational standard for journalism, there is a consensus among scholars in the field of journalism studies regarding certain universal similarities (Deuze 2005). This consensus suggests that journalism is distinguished from other public professions by its unique belief systems, ethical orientations, professional standards, societal functions, and the role of journalists as autonomous public service providers committed to validation and shared reality. Additionally, institutionalized norms and cultural entities within the profession shape the everyday work of newsrooms. In relation to this thesis, understanding these unique characteristics of journalism is crucial. On one hand, the profession plays an essential role in supporting democratic societies; on the other hand, internal dynamics within media organizations, such as institutional norms and cultural practices, shape how online harassment is managed and addressed. These dynamics can either reinforce journalists' resilience against such harassment or leave them vulnerable to its impacts—the focus of Paper III in this thesis.

A note on 'legal' in this thesis

As this thesis is grounded in the socio-legal tradition, it is important to clarify my use of the term 'legal system,' a concept frequently employed throughout this work, to align with the analytical positioning of this field. Generally, this

thesis adopts a traditional socio-legal approach, recognizing the role of law in social life and its dynamic nature (Cotterrell et al., 2002). In practical terms, it primarily employs empirical and inductive methods while also incorporating abductive reasoning, as previously mentioned. However, as Svensson (2016) emphasizes, gaining a deeper understanding of the law necessitates recognizing the intrinsic nature of the legal system. Therefore, although not a central focus of this thesis, the legal provisions relevant to Swedish criminal law concerning online harassment merit some attention.

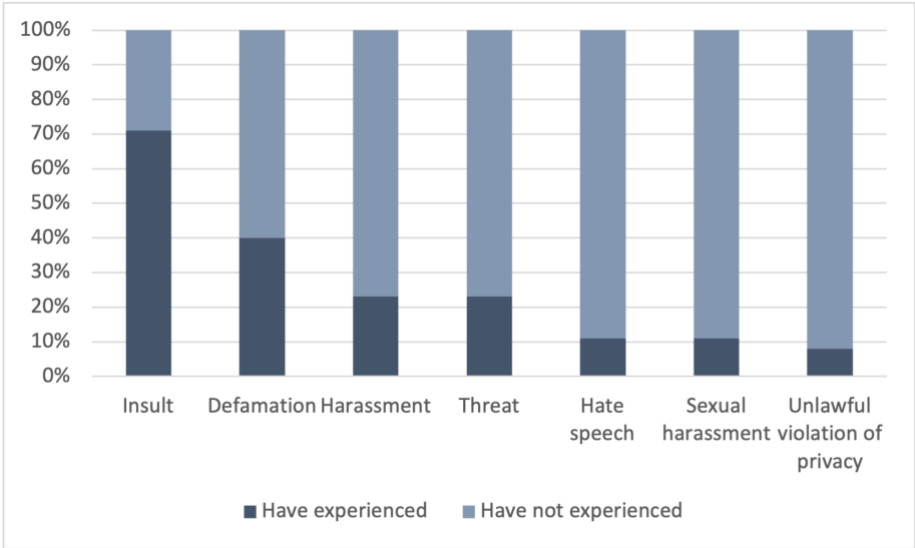
In essence, the provisions encompass seven offenses: defamation (*'förtal'*), insulting conduct (*'förolämpning'*), unlawful threats (*'olaga hot'*), molestation (*'ofredande'*), sexual abuse (*'sexuellt ofredande'*), hate speech (*'hets mot folkgrupp'*), and unlawful invasion of privacy (*'olaga integritetsintrång'*). Consequently, although my analysis does not delve into the specifics of legal doctrine, the significance of these crimes in understanding how journalists perceive and interact with the legal system remains critical. This aspect is thoroughly explored in Paper I, which examines journalists' experiences within the legal system in this context. Additionally, Paper IV initially included an account of journalists' self-reported exposure to these offenses. After revisions made just prior to the printing of this thesis, this information was removed from the paper and will instead be presented at the end of this section. However, as will be discussed in more detail below, online harassment involves more than just legal infractions; thus, it should be understood through broader social, psychological, and ethical perspectives, not solely through its legality.

Furthermore, the term 'the legal system' broadly encompasses perceptions of law enforcement agencies, such as the police, as well as the criminal justice system, which includes courts and prosecutors. Throughout this dissertation, and more specifically in Paper I, the legal system is treated as a unified entity rather than as a collection of disparate legal norms. This approach aligns with research on procedural justice, which examines how individuals perceive the fairness and legitimacy of legal systems and how these perceptions subsequently influence their trust in these systems (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003; Tyler and Blader, 2013).

Thus, 'the legal system' here primarily refers to aspects directly governed by the criminal justice apparatus and the perceptions of these aspects as a collective unity. However, it does not extend in the same manner to workplace regulations. Although workplace regulations shape social interactions and are a key subject of analysis in this thesis, they are generally mediated through civil mechanisms such as the Work Environment Act, rather than the criminal

justice system. Thus, while these regulations are indeed enforced by the state, they operate within a different realm of legal oversight. Consequently, this thesis treats these sets of norms distinctly to maintain a clear analytical separation between criminal justice enforcement of legal standards and the regulatory frameworks governed through civil legislation.

Figure 1: Prevalence of online harassment types reported by journalists.



Defining online harassment within journalism

Harassment, as a term, embodies an inherently ambiguous concept due to divergent interpretations predicated on contextual, cultural, and subjective nuances. Consequently, it is pivotal in this research context to precisely delineate the specific connotation of 'harassment' as it is employed herein. In journalism studies, the term 'harassment' is commonly utilized (Miller, 2023) to describe behaviors that might be termed bullying, violence, abuse, or aggression in other workplace contexts. However, even within journalism studies, the precise definition of 'harassment'—particularly in methodological contexts such as surveys and interviews—remains elusive, as noted by Miller (2023) in her comprehensive review. This ambiguity presents challenges from a workplace perspective, impeding the development of theoretical conceptualizations and complicating collaborations between scholars

(Crawshaw, 2009). Furthermore, without a clear definition, effectively addressing the problem in practice becomes more challenging.

In her exploration of online harassment in journalism, Miller (2023) draws on the definitions of workplace harassment by scholars like Patchin and Hinduja (2015), who describe it as 'unwanted aggressive behavior,' and Bowling and Beehr (2006), who view it as 'interpersonal behavior aimed at intentionally harming another.' However, Miller points out that these definitions may not sufficiently cover instances of harassment that are neither overtly aggressive nor intentionally harmful. She also highlights the challenge of applying definitions intended for inter-organizational harassment to cases involving perpetrators external to the organization, noting differences in frequency, type, and impact. Addressing these gaps, Miller and Lewis et al. (2020) propose a broader definition, identifying harassment as “unwanted behaviors that are sexual, abusive, sexist, or aggressive in nature.” This definition, as Miller emphasizes, is descriptively comprehensive and significant in its consideration of harassment not just in the perpetrator's intent but also in the victim's perception, thus acknowledging the subjective nature of the harm experienced.

Expanding the discourse, Miller (2023) simplifies the definition of harassment to “unwanted abusive behaviors”, a term that spans a wide spectrum of abuse from mild to severe. The use of “abusive” in this definition helps to differentiate harassment from mere workplace annoyances, while “unwanted” grants agency to the victim in recognizing and defining such behaviors. This research, while aligning with Miller's definition, further deepens the understanding of online harassment against journalists by considering its sociocultural context and intended purpose. By adopting a sociopragmatic perspective, this thesis posits that the issue should be examined within a wider societal framework.

In defining online harassment within journalism, this research integrates Miller's (2023) broad conceptualization with the concept of Destructive Informal Social Control (DISC), which is defined as follows in Paper II:

The use of derogatory language, insults, offensive or implicit questioning, shame, and general disapproval as a means of exerting an adverse influence over democratic institutions, professions, and actors. This type of action aims to maintain discursive power without relying on formal authority and typically operates within the bounds of legal regulations (Björkenfeldt and Gustafsson, p 175, 2023).

Through the conceptualizations of DISC, online harassment is acknowledged across a spectrum of abuse, from subtle to overt, while also emphasizing the normative aim of dissuading journalists by cultivating an atmosphere of fear,

hesitation, and uncertainty through coordinated attacks. Thus, DISC extends beyond Miller's definition by considering online harassment within the context of sociocultural currents and the intentions behind such behaviors. Consequently, the destructive nature of this phenomenon is primarily attributed not to the legality of online harassment itself but rather to the attempt to shape and regulate journalists' behavior.

The Swedish Context within Global Dynamics

Having defined online harassment against journalists, the focus now turns to the empirical context of this research. This involves an exploration of the Swedish media landscape, viewed against the backdrop of global developments in online harassment against journalists. Although the research is situated in Sweden, the trend of undermining media credibility is not confined to this region alone—it has gained significant momentum globally. This development is largely associated with the rhetoric of high-profile political figures, with former U.S. President Donald Trump being a notable example. He consistently employs terms like ‘fake news’ to delegitimize unfavorable media narratives and even label journalists “the enemy of the people” (Carlson et al., 2021; Meeks, 2020). However, this phenomenon is not unique to the United States; similar patterns have emerged in various countries, including Australia (Farhall et al., 2019; Wright, 2021), Germany (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Koliska and Assmann, 2021), and in both semi-democratic and authoritarian regimes (Waisbord and Amado, 2017; Solis and Sagarzazu, 2020). Scholars have identified this form of media criticism as an attempt to diminish the media's epistemic authority and sway public opinion (Waisbord and Amado, 2017; Farhall et al., 2019; Solis and Sagarzazu, 2020), contrasting sharply with constructive media criticism that seeks to uphold journalistic standards through accountability (Carlson, 2009).

Delegitimizing media criticism typically features superficial arguments lacking decorum and clear rationale (Egelhofer et al., 2021). Common accusations include spreading ‘fake news’ or intentionally concealing the truth (Cheruiyot, 2018; Farhall et al., 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019; Tandoc, 2019; Koliska and Assmann, 2021; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Wright, 2021). These accusations are frequently accompanied by unfounded allegations of political bias used in politically motivated attacks (Domke et al., 1999; Watts et al., 1999; Eberl, 2019). The critiques are often emotionally charged, directed toward journalists or the media, and laden with emotions such as disgust, shame, and hatred (Koliska and Assmann, 2021; Saesma and Tulonen, 2023;

Shin et al., 2021). While the precise impact of these tactics on public trust in journalism remains under-researched, a German study showed that journalists perceive these attacks as negatively influencing public perception of their profession (Obermaier, Hofbauer, and Reinemann, 2018).

While global trends are informative, the situation in Sweden presents its own unique characteristics. Turning our attention to the Swedish context, the phenomenon of undermined media credibility manifests in distinct expressions and challenges within the country. Sweden's journalistic and public discourse landscapes are shaped by national media policies, cultural norms, and political dynamics. Despite Sweden's impressive fourth-place ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) for overall press freedom, the country is not immune to challenges. It faces issues with online hostility, as indicated by its lower 40th-place position in the RSF index's security metrics. These metrics assess journalists' capacity to safely gather and disseminate news without physical, psychological, or professional risks. Additionally, there has been a notable shift among several right-leaning political parties advocating for reduced funding and a more constrained role for public-service media, as highlighted by Strömbäck (2022). This political shift has occurred in tandem with the emergence of alternative media outlets that have garnered significant online followings (Merrill and Åkerlund, 2018; Törnberg and Wahlström, 2018).

The ascent of populist movements and shifting political narratives in Sweden are exposing vulnerabilities in the country's long-established media welfare state model. This model, traditionally sustained by a broad political consensus that supports media independence and self-regulation, has been bolstered by press subsidies and public service media (Von Krogh, 2012; Syvertsen et al., 2014; Liminga and Strömbäck, 2023). Media's entrenched role in Swedish society, as outlined by scholars like Schulze (2020) and Liminga and Strömbäck (2023), is now facing increased scrutiny. This trend coincides with the intensification of online harassment targeting journalists.

Research reveals that supporters of the right-wing, authoritarian Sweden Democrats (SD), and to a lesser degree, the liberal-conservative Moderates, exhibit lower levels of trust in media and a propensity for hostile media perceptions (Andersson, 2017; Strömbäck and Karlsson, 2017; Oleskog Tryggvason and Andersson, 2022). Furthermore, many of Sweden's right-leaning, media-critical alternative news sources maintain direct or indirect connections with the SD (Ekman and Widholm, 2022). This trend is accompanied by increasing skepticism, particularly in news coverage of immigration, a sentiment more intensified in this domain than in other areas of

news reporting (Truedson, 2016; Andersson, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2017; Tsfati et al., 2022). Swedish studies have identified a link between these media-critical attitudes and an escalation in online harassment targeting journalists (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016), highlighting a concerning trend in the intersection of political views and media interactions.

As a result, the patterns observed globally in the erosion of media credibility, marked by political rhetoric and the ascent of populist ideologies, are also evident in the Swedish landscape. The increasing skepticism, particularly in the coverage of polarizing issues such as immigration, along with the rise in online harassment of journalists, reflects a broader international trend. In Sweden, the emergence of media-critical alternative news sources and calls for a more restricted role for public-service media are in line with a worldwide shift in media perceptions and interactions. These shifts in Sweden, against the backdrop of its historically robust media welfare state model, underscore the far-reaching influence of this global phenomenon. Consequently, the Swedish case offers a unique and valuable field of study, providing insights into how a nation renowned for its strong media freedoms is navigating these emerging challenges. This, in turn, contributes important perspectives to the global conversation on media credibility and the integrity of journalism.

Coping, Health, and Organizational Support

Research that approaches the effects of online harassment against journalists is unequivocal in demonstrating adverse impacts on the mental and emotional well-being of journalists, regardless of their age, gender, or country of residence (Sammur et al., 2023, as part of a comprehensive literature review). This research has identified a range of harmful emotional and psychological outcomes associated with online harassment. These include feelings of sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, self-doubt, self-blame, intimidation, isolation, loneliness, burnout, and insomnia. Furthermore, many journalists report heightened concerns for their personal safety and the safety of their loved ones, underscoring the impact of such harassment on individual well-being and its broader implications for personal security.

Additionally, several studies emphasize that online harassment is often normalized as an unavoidable part of the journalistic profession (Adams 2018; Blanco-Castilla, Miranda et al., 2023; Sarikakis et al., 2023; Tandoc, Sagun, and Alvarez, 2023). Cultural stigma, alongside perceptions of the legal

system's ineffectiveness in addressing online harassment, contribute to journalists' reluctance to report such incidents to law enforcement (Koirala 2020; Miranda et al., 2023; Sarikakis et al., 2023). As a result, rather than seeking legal action, journalists often resort to various coping strategies to mitigate the stress and effects of online harassment. Sammut et al. (2023) outline these methods, which include limiting online social interactions, avoiding contentious topics, engaging in self-censorship, ignoring abuse, writing anonymously, blocking harassers, taking breaks from work, and, in some instances, changing or leaving their jobs. The study by Obermaier, Hofbauer, and Reinemann (2018) corroborates this, indicating that German journalists typically favor emotion-focused coping strategies, often turning to personal support systems such as family and friends rather than professional networks or legal avenues. In essence, this research suggests that journalists tend to manage the adverse effects of online harassment independently, frequently without the backing of a comprehensive societal or professional support system.

From a societal perspective, self-censorship arguably represents the most detrimental coping mechanism, as it poses a fundamental threat to the integrity of free journalism. While numerous studies have highlighted the prevalence of self-censorship among journalists in response to online harassment (see Sammut et al., 2023, or Miller, 2023 for extensive literature reviews and Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016 and Scarmuzzino, 2020 for research conducted in Sweden), these studies predominantly rely on self-reporting measures (Fadnes et al., 2020). This approach, however, is limited in its ability to delve into the motivational factors driving such behavior. This limitation is especially concerning considering the complex and subjective nature of self-censorship, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative frequency measures alone. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the factors that either mitigate or exacerbate self-censorship is essential. Without this insight, news organizations face difficulties in developing effective strategies to counteract these behaviors. As noted by Jungblut and Hoxha (2017, p. 227), the absence of appropriate interventions may result in journalists internalizing constraints on their reporting.

Furthermore, although some research sheds light on organizational responses to online harassment, these studies predominantly concentrate on journalists' perceptions of such support. While understanding journalists' experiences is undeniably important, delving deeply into media managers' perspectives is equally essential. Media managers are instrumental in forming workplace policies and overseeing their implementation. Yet, there is a gap in research on

how managers and employers perceive online harassment targeting their journalistic staff. One important exception is the study by Malcorps, Libert, and Le Cam in 2022. Conducted with Belgian media managers, this research reveals the difficulties they encounter in consistently defining online harassment against journalists. Their responses to this issue mirror their interpretations: actions are frequently hesitant, with formalized reporting and intervention protocols often absent, and preventive measures limited. While this study offers valuable insights, it predominantly remains descriptive and does not delve into the theoretical aspects that might elucidate why media organizations have not yet established a comprehensive and systematic approach to this challenge. This lack of theoretical depth leaves a vital area insufficiently explored. It raises questions not only about how media managers perceive and address work-related challenges arising from online harassment but also about how ingrained structures, norms, and practices within organizations influence these perceptions and responses. Article III of this thesis aims to bridge this gap, providing a deeper exploration of these issues.

Finally, it is important to stress that while this thesis primarily focuses on online harassment as a structural pressure on the journalistic profession—particularly when it targets viewpoints that diverge from populist and anti-press narratives, as previously discussed—a considerable body of research indicates that certain groups of journalists are more vulnerable than others, exhibiting clear patterns based on gender and race. Female journalists, along with journalists from foreign backgrounds or minority groups, are frequent targets of this type of online abuse (e.g., Chen et al. 2020; Koirala 2020; Miller and Lewis 2020; Kundu and Bhuiyan 2021; Tandoc, Sagun, and Alvarez 2021; Kempton and Connolly-Ahern 2022; Al-Rawi 2023; Siddiqua, Gong, and Aksar 2023; Zviyita and Mare 2023). As a result, they often endure sexist, misogynistic, or xenophobic language, reflecting rhetoric that aligns with populist ideologies.

Structure

The initial section of the thesis examines the Swedish working life model, psychosocial work environment, and legislative framework, highlighting workplace challenges due to online harassment and the blurring of lines between criminal law and workplace protection. Subsequently, I present and discuss the overarching analytical concepts that have shaped and directed the research. Following this is a discussion of the research methodology, detailing

the specific methods used, ethical considerations, and a reflection on the research's limitations and delimitations. The thesis then provides concise summaries of each of the four included papers. Finally, it concludes with reflections on the research findings and offers tentative suggestions for future directions.

Digital Transition in Workplace Harassment: The Swedish Context

This section provides an overview of the Swedish working life model and the concept of psychosocial work environment, highlighting the unique workplace culture of the Nordic region, its historical evolution, and its legislative emphasis. It explores the broad and subjective interpretations of the psychosocial work environment and delves into recent critiques and debates surrounding its definitions. In doing so, this section also sheds light on the challenges of applying the Swedish Work Environment Act guidelines, especially in contemporary contexts colored by social and cultural changes. In conclusion, the section broadens its focus to include legal and policy developments within Sweden and internationally.

The Nordic Model of Working Life and Psychosocial Work Environment

In the Nordic regions, workplace culture is distinguished by high levels of democratic practices and mutual trust, reflecting their status as welfare states with deep-rooted traditions in union activity, collective bargaining, and collaboration among social stakeholders (Gustavsen, 2007; Hvid and Falkum, 2019). This backdrop has fostered the Swedish or Nordic model of working life, setting a benchmark in labor relations and workplace organization, notable for its adept balance of economic efficiency and social welfare. Nordic countries excel in areas such as employment, work-related health, wages, job security, and inclusion in the labor market (Hvid and Falkum, 2019). Consequently, these foundational elements, when paired with job responsibilities and active engagement in professional life, are often argued to contribute to a healthy, productive, and sustainable work–life balance.

Building upon the foundations of the Nordic model, the concept of the psychosocial work environment holds a significant place in Swedish discourse on workplace dynamics. Well-established and widely recognized in Sweden, particularly in relation to stress and illness, this concept was first introduced by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson in 1959. Its relevance was further emphasized with the enactment of the Swedish Work Environment Act (SFS 1977) in 1977. Nonetheless, fully comprehending psychosocial work environments can be challenging due to their expansive scope. For instance, Abrahamsson and Johansson (2013) suggest a common definition referring to people's interactions with their surroundings. This broad interpretation encompasses the 'physical work environment'—which includes the body, space, technology, and organizational structure—as well as the 'psychological work environment'—involving the mind, symbols, discourses, relationships, and personal experiences. While it is pedagogically beneficial to categorize these elements as physical or psychological, it's important to recognize that psychological factors are often subjective, causing individuals to perceive and be influenced by the same workplace environment in various ways (Abrahamsson and Johansson, 2013).

While this is true, the broad and subjective definitions of the psychosocial environment have faced criticism in recent years. Reiner Rugulies (2019), a professor at the Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment, highlights a risk in this focus on subjectivity in potentially overemphasizing the role of the individual. Such argumentation has sparked a contentious debate over whether definitions of 'psychosocial' have inadvertently shifted the emphasis too much toward psychological phenomena, thereby diminishing the importance of organizational and social aspects.

In light of this debate, defining psychosocial factors proves to be challenging. The term is often interpreted in varied ways: some authors perceive psychosocial factors as synonymous with 'work organization,' while others see them as extending to 'individual aspects,' such as 'personality and attitudes' (see Rugulies, 2019, for a more detailed outlining of these perspectives). This varied use of the term, covering a range of phenomena from organizational structures to individual traits, introduces ambiguity in its definition. The question of how organizational and individual elements are interrelated in the concept of the psychosocial work environment remains an area of ongoing exploration.

This thesis asserts that the psychosocial hazards stemming from online harassment—a relatively new work environment issue—pose a challenge to the effective application of the Swedish Work Environment Act's guidelines.

The Act's broad scope, while comprehensive, presents both opportunities and challenges in addressing the nuanced aspects of psychosocial well-being in the context of online harassment. I argue that while the Act's ambiguity grants necessary flexibility, it simultaneously introduces complexities in enforcement, especially when integrating these guidelines into specific workplace practices shaped by prevailing norms and culture. This research demonstrates, in Paper III, that the Act's guidelines on psychosocial health are challenging to adapt to the workplace hazards posed by the relatively new phenomenon of online harassment. Achieving this requires a skillful balance between adhering to general principles and addressing specific workplace realities. The foundational elements of the Swedish Work Environment Act, particularly its connection to psychosocial health, will be explored in the subsequent section.

The Work Environment Act

As mentioned, the Work Environment Act (AML) introduced in Sweden in 1977 marked a significant shift in the country's discourse on work environments, notably elevating the status of the psychosocial work environment. This legislation advocated a holistic perspective, emphasizing the importance of both psychosocial and organizational factors in work settings, a focus that remains highly relevant today.

Under AML, 'work environment responsibility' is defined as the obligation to prevent occupational illnesses and accidents while promoting a positive work environment. The Act outlines that the work environment should be satisfactory, considering the nature of the work and the evolving social and technological landscape. It mandates that work organization, technology, and job nature should protect employees from physical or mental strains that could lead to health issues or accidents and that the work environment should accommodate diverse physical and mental capacities. In line with the Act's dynamic principle, comprehensive regulations guide systematic work environment management (AFS 2001, 1). Employers must conduct investigations, implement preventive measures, and monitor their effectiveness to ensure a satisfactory work environment. This includes addressing the workplace's physical, psychological, and social aspects (Arbetsmiljöverket 2016, 10).

Employers, under Section 3:2a of the AML, must systematically plan, lead, and control operations to meet prescribed work environment standards. This involves investigating work-related injuries, assessing risks, taking corrective actions, and documenting these efforts. The Work Environment Authority's regulations on systematic work environment management (AFS 2001:1) outline obligations for examining, implementing, and monitoring operations to prevent accidents and ill health. Moreover, employers are expected to follow the Work Environment Authority's regulations, respond to its interventions, and manage their own work environments. This includes considering new research on the work environment's relationship with stress and illness, requiring a balance between different interests.

The ALM, although primarily addressing internal workplace interactions, indirectly encompasses challenges like online harassment. While not explicitly mentioned, the principles of the Act are adaptable and increasingly recognized as relevant to contemporary issues like online threats. For instance, organizations such as the Swedish Union of Journalism and Prevent have developed resources to apply the general guidelines of the ALM in media sectors. The Swedish Work Environment Authority also provides regulations and resources for handling violence and threats in the workplace (AFS 1993:2), although the focus has remained more on physical violence than on online harassment.

Online Harassment against Journalists: A New Dimension in Workplace Challenges

Reflecting global trends, digitalization has profoundly influenced working life in Sweden. Although the country maintains a strong tradition of valuing and regulating the work environment and fostering work–life well-being, as previously discussed, achieving a sustainable work–life balance and overall well-being requires not only preserving and strengthening existing qualities but also addressing new challenges (Rolandsson et al., 2020). This is particularly true in the field of journalism, just as in other professional areas, as digitalization reshapes the nature of media work and its associated challenges.

In journalism, this technological shift has restructured the work environment, significantly changed the nature of journalistic duties, and contributed to new challenges for journalistic work (Gans, 2010; Lee, 2015; Peciulis, 2016;

Turner, 2018). Digitalization has facilitated flexible work arrangements, allowing journalists to balance professional obligations more effectively with personal life through varied locations and schedules. However, this increased flexibility also introduces its own challenges. In today's digital realm, professional tasks that were once confined to controlled environments now encroach upon personal spaces (Lukan and Čehovin Zajc, 2023).

In this context of increasingly blurred lines between professional and personal life, the phenomenon of online harassment represents a transformation in workplace dynamics. Similar to the concept of 'cyber' in cyberbullying (Forssell, 2019), online harassment introduces a technological dimension to traditional harassment and challenges workplace boundaries in several ways. This form of harassment—omnipresent and unconstrained by time or space—and often originating from external actors, diverges from much of the existing workplace harassment literature, which tends to focus on internal interactions; both online and offline (Deery et al., 2011; Miller, 2023). Thus, although workplace violence and bullying have been recognized as major occupational hazards within working life research for over three decades, especially in human service sectors (Boudrias et al., 2021; Guay et al., 2015; McDonald, 2012), online harassment targeting journalists and other public professions has not been extensively explored.

Echoing the broader focus of working life research, the Swedish government has recognized the prevalence of violence, threats, and harassment in various sectors, including education, healthcare, social services, law enforcement, government operations, and retail. The Government's Work Environment Strategy 2021–2025 categorizes such incidents in these sectors as occupational hazards and threats to the essence of a democratic society. Yet, notably absent in this recognition is the specific issue of online harassment against journalists. Despite its increasing prevalence and the serious implications this form of harassment has not been explicitly acknowledged or addressed as a clear work environment problem either by the Swedish government or within the wider scope of working-life research.

A Gray Area of Criminal Law and Workplace Protection

The growing prevalence of online harassment against journalists in Sweden and globally has spurred discussions among legal experts and policymakers. This dialogue is centered on redefining victimization to include the specific challenges posed by digital threats and harassment (see, for instance, Posetti et al., 2021; Baroni et al., 2022). In response, Sweden made a significant move in August 2023 by enhancing legal penalties to provide stronger protection for journalists and news professionals. These legal improvements aim to counteract efforts to negatively influence journalists, whether by altering their coverage on certain topics or as retaliation for previous reports (Regeringen, 2023). Such legal adaptations signify an increasing awareness of the need for robust measures to protect journalistic freedom of expression in the digital era.

Moreover, these developments in Sweden align with wider international concerns. Entities like the United Nations² and the European Union³ have recognized the importance of reinforcing defenses for journalists against online harassment. A key part of this global discourse involves adapting current legal frameworks to address crimes committed in digital spaces effectively. This reflects an understanding that existing laws may not be adequately applied to online offenses. It highlights that the legal system's resources and expertise need updating to address unlawful online harassment aimed at influencing journalists, a claim further strengthened by Paper I in this thesis. Therefore, the challenge involves not only redefining victimization but also ensuring that existing laws are effectively applicable in digital contexts. Ultimately, these initiatives in Sweden and internationally signal an ongoing shift toward more comprehensive legal protections.

Building on the previous discussion, it is crucial to note the persistent gap in recognizing journalists as victims of crimes in cases of online harassment. Despite the legal advancements and growing awareness of the issue, journalists frequently find themselves in a gray area when seeking justice for online

2 For example, the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity addresses prevention, protection, and prosecution.

3 For example, the European strategy for the media which, in turn, builds on the European Democracy Action Plan and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan

harassment. Convictions in such cases remain exceedingly rare⁴, highlighting a disconnect between the evolving nature of digital threats and the traditional legal frameworks already in place. This discrepancy is not just a matter of legal definitions but also reflects broader challenges in the practical application of laws to the digital realm (Brown, 2017; Yar, 2018). Due to their complex, anonymous, and cross-jurisdictional nature, law enforcement agencies and judicial systems often grapple with identifying, tracking, and prosecuting online offenses. As a result, journalists subjected to online harassment frequently encounter obstacles in recognizing their cases as criminal offenses, let alone seeing them result in convictions.

While improving such legal shortcomings is important in safeguarding journalists' autonomy and free speech, the rarity of convictions in cases of online harassment underscores the paradoxical concern addressed in the thesis. Namely, these incidents often fall under the umbrella of 'free speech,' making them difficult to categorize and address as clear legal violations. The ambiguous and sometimes subjective nature of defining harassment in the digital space further complicates the issue, blurring the lines between illegal conduct and protected speech.

Consequently, journalists facing online harassment often find themselves in a precarious position where their experiences are not adequately recognized and responded to within the existing legal framework. This issue cannot be solely attributed to inefficient applications of current law or attitudes within the legal system; it is closely tied to the fact that much online harassment is formulated in a way that falls outside the scope of criminal law. This was briefly highlighted in the initial state investigation (SOU 2022:22) that preceded sentence enhancements in Sweden. The investigation noted that while sentence enhancements might carry considerable symbolic value, most attacks against journalists typically only result in fines for defamation crimes. Essentially, journalists often face adverse and externally driven workplace pressures which challenge the efficiency of the legal system.

4 Although there are no specific statistics on unlawful online harassment against journalists, Swedish reports have indicated a significantly low conviction rate for offenses related to online activity. For instance, a report from The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) revealed that out of the reported threats and violations reviewed by BRÅ in 2015, 96% were discontinued by either the police or by the prosecutor (Andersson et al., 2015).

Conceptual Foundation and Interpretive Frameworks

As highlighted in the introductory chapter, this thesis employs an abductive method, also referred to as an ‘abductive research strategy’. Rooted in the principles of abductive reasoning, introduced by Peirce (1960), the abductive method can evolve into a comprehensive research methodology. This approach is distinguished by a systematic and continuous interplay between theory and data (Van Maanen et al., 2007). As previously mentioned, the process commenced with an initial socio-legal observation of a freedom of speech paradox. The survey data used in Paper I then informed the investigation into both the language of online harassment (explored in Paper II) and its framing as a workplace environment issue (investigated in Paper III). This exploration led to the application and subsequent refinement of theoretical perspectives through further data collection and analysis, creating an iterative cycle. This cycle, in turn, culminated in the exploration of self-censorship (investigated in Paper IV).

This approach seeks to explore potential explanatory patterns within the phenomenon of online harassment against journalists, using these patterns as a cognitive means to generate abductive hypotheses that guide the search for theory (Åsvoll, 2014). As such, this process does not ‘test’ or validate in the manner that deductive inquiry does (Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013) but rather produces a plausible explanation that can be subjected to additional scrutiny or validation through induction and deduction (Folger and Stein, 2017). Thus, the theoretical perspectives used in this thesis serve not just as a starting point for investigation but as evolving frameworks that both shape and are shaped by empirical findings. In other words, theories are dynamically engaged with, fostering a responsive interaction between theory and data, ensuring that the research remains grounded while open to new directions and insights.

However, despite its advantages for fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and intellectual creativity, the abductive approach is not without challenges. One challenge is the potential for a proliferation of theories, which can lead to

fragmentation and undermine the coherence of the analytical framework. To address this, a structured, iterative cycle between conceptual frameworks and data, all under the overarching conceptual umbrella of 'social disorientation,' is adopted. This concept of social disorientation was developed after placing all four articles side by side in the dissertation, allowing their findings to be synthesized. Analyzing the interconnected themes and patterns across these articles made it evident that a unifying concept was necessary. Within this overarching foundation, the three interpretive perspectives of the thesis play a key role in elucidating this state in relation to the research aim. These interpretive lenses clarify the broader concept of social disorientation and are intimately linked with the methodologies employed in this thesis, ensuring a cohesive and integrated analytical framework.

Defining Social Disorientation

Since Durkheim, sociological theorists have been concerned with the normative-value regulation, or deregulation, in society, known as 'anomie'. This tradition has fostered a fascination with understanding social dynamics in relation to societal transformations. Alongside other European thinkers such as Marx (1956) and Weber (1930), Durkheim (1997) grappled with the challenges of modernity and sought to identify the key features underlying social change. A famous dictum in classical sociology is therefore that anomie arises when social facts break down or are inadequate. In a well-functioning society, social facts provide structure, regulate behavior, and create a sense of social order. When these social facts are disrupted, weakened, or rapidly changed (for instance, during massive economic shifts, wars, or technological revolutions), it can lead to a state of social disorientation.

In this regard, a classical notion in both sociology and socio-legal studies is that social facts exert a coercive influence over individuals. As argued by Deflem and Silva (2021), the coerciveness of social facts, even amidst a culture that venerates the self, does not imply that various modes of individual action and speech are without consequences. This includes both formal and informal sanctions when actions or statements violate the expectations of the cultural and normative order.

To more clearly frame this in relation to this thesis, especially with respect to the balance between free speech and its regulation through law and other frameworks, we find ourselves navigating uncertain times. Reflecting the

paradoxical dynamics outlined here, it might not be surprising that the freedoms of our age are intertwined with a renewed measure of repression (Deflem and Silva, 2021). Accordingly, in the era of ‘mass self-publication’ (Castells, 2009), we encounter a complex reality where the flux and diversities challenge encapsulation within traditional theoretical models, such as Habermas’s (1989) theory of the public sphere’s transformation. For example, defining what constitutes a ‘public’ is an increasingly complex task. A more effective approach, from a research standpoint, is to gain empirical insights into the dynamic and ever-changing system of interacting forces (Bruns, 2018).

Here, the diverse and expanded media landscape, characterized by the questioning of traditional media and phenomena such as the “war on science” (Silva, 2018), can be seen as one example colored by a state of social disorientation and a suitable object for empirical investigation. With respect to socio-legal studies, these paradoxical developments in freedoms and evolving uncertain social facts present challenges for systems like politics and law, which struggle to keep pace with society’s increasing complexity and diversity (Banakar, 2015). To contextualize this within the scope of this thesis, the increased mob-like dynamics of online harassment, amplified by the rapid speed and magnitude of digital communication, present unprecedented dilemmas in safeguarding democratic values. In this context, the weaponization of freedom of speech to control or restrict journalistic expression signifies a diminished influence of both traditional formal and informal societal controls.

To elaborate, online interaction’s disconnection from the physical allows individuals to engage in harassment with fewer legal and social repercussions. This situation is further complicated by the evolving public perception of what constitutes acceptable speech, criticism—or in broader terms, what constitutes a valid fact or the truth (often referred to as a ‘post-truth’ society). Thus, the lines between constructive criticism, political discourse, and harmful speech are increasingly blurred, making it challenging to define and enforce limits without infringing on the principle of free speech. Furthermore, this landscape of pressure against journalists, characterized by unclear pathways for justice and support, also fosters a sense of uncertainty regarding how this issue should be addressed and regulated to safeguard public interests. On an individual level, it can also be argued that there is a lack of informal mechanisms, such as social norms, moral rules, and cultural values centered around behavior when exposed to online harassment.

In short, social disorientation offers a perspective for understanding and navigating the dissolution of traditional structures, the renegotiation of norms,

and the complexities journalism faces in the digital era. This concept encapsulates the uncertainty and highlights the need for continuous adaptation, both of which are essential in addressing the challenges posed by the increased questioning of traditional media.

Three Core Elements of Social Disorientation in the Digital Age

In the context of this thesis, three central components emerge to deepen our understanding of social disorientation in the evolving digital landscape. These components are: (1) the normalization of abusive online communication; (2) the institutional challenges of adapting to work-related issues stemming from online harassment, with a focus on protecting the autonomy of journalism; and (3) the resulting behavioral uncertainties for individual journalists who face online harassment. Thus, these three conceptual perspectives capture the fundamental elements of the overarching framework of social disorientation.

Each of these three perspectives will be outlined in separate sections with distinct conceptual foundations. The first section acknowledges the gradual normalization of hostile and aggressive language in public communication, once considered taboo, as part of these evolving conditions. This phenomenon represents a breakdown of traditional communication norms, aligning with Culpeper's (2011) concepts of impoliteness and Wodak's (2015; 2021) notion of "shameless normalization", where the boundaries of acceptable public discourse are continually tested and redefined. This sociopragmatic framework is adopted to analyze the interplay between online harassment, public discourse, and sociopolitical trends of populist and anti-press rhetoric.

The second section applies neo-institutional organizational theory to examine how news organizations adapt to shifting norms while maintaining journalistic integrity and protecting their staff. Drawing upon the work of scholars like Scott (2008), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and Meyer and Rowan (1977), it explores the impact of institutional pillars—regulative, normative, and cultural—cognitive—on media management and in the handling of online harassment. This perspective is used to understand how media institutions navigate the psychosocial impacts of online harassment on their staff, highlighting the interplay between institutional structures, norms, and practices.

Lastly, the third section addresses self-censorship as a micro-level manifestation of social disorientation, viewing it as either an instinctual–psychological disposition or behavior driven by social conformity. This perspective reflects a broader inquiry into understanding the dynamics underpinning journalists' self-censorship when faced with online harassment. Simply put, the final conceptual element of this thesis aims to understand and empirically examine the factors that mitigate or exacerbate self-censorship in these uncertain conditions.

Sociopragmatic of Online Harassment: Unveiling the Interplay of Impoliteness, Morality, and Ideology in Media Discourse

Recognizing the need for a sociopragmatic perspective in understanding online harassment, this approach delves into the nuances of language as a tool of power and control in online interactions. This exploration aids in understanding the ways in which language is used with the intention of undermining journalism's credibility. It involves deciphering the motives behind specific language choices, thereby shedding light on the connection between sociopolitical structures, language, and online harassment. Central to this approach is the interplay between linguistic impoliteness and sociopragmatic. Jonathan Culpeper (2011) offers a foundational understanding of impoliteness, defining it as a broad term encompassing various offensive behaviors within distinct social contexts. His detailed explanation of this concept provides the essential groundwork for analysis:

Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires, and/or beliefs about social organization, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviors are viewed negatively—considered 'impolite'—when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be, and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviors always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behavior is taken to be, including, for example, whether one understands a behavior to be strongly intentional or not (Culpeper, 2011, p. 23)

Culpeper's (2011) definition weaves together the concepts of interaction and impoliteness, positioning sociopragmatism at the forefront of its analytical

exploration. Viewed through a sociopragmatic lens, impoliteness is interpreted as a purposeful use of language to express rudeness, disrespect, or offense. This extends beyond mere language selection, unfolding as a calculated communicative strategy aimed at achieving specific objectives or manipulating power dynamics in social exchanges (Culpeper, 2011).

Thus, sociopragmatic research on impolite or aggressive language use extends beyond mere analysis of language; it involves understanding how words can strategically diminish the credibility or social standing of entities such as social groups or professional bodies (Culpeper, 2011). To further contextualize this in terms of public discourse, Ruth Wodak's (2015; 2021) concept of 'shameless normalization' is incorporated. Wodak's analysis is particularly relevant for examining online harassment against journalists, as it explores how extreme or offensive language, once deemed taboo or unacceptable, has gradually become normalized in public communication. Her work depicts how far-right populist rhetoric, previously confined to the fringes, now loudly resounds in mainstream discourse. This shift has effectively moved the goalposts of what is deemed acceptable, creating a "new normal" where provocative rhetoric is increasingly commonplace⁵. In the realm of journalism, this transition risks eroding the perceived authority and trustworthiness of journalists, reflecting a change in political culture. Here, the norms of negotiation and civility are overshadowed by a surge in aggressive communication, a trend exacerbated by the internet and social media's attention-fueling architecture (van Dijk et al., 2018).

Although the study of normalization has not traditionally focused on impoliteness, it has shed light on how fringe ideologies have progressively infiltrated the mainstream fabric of politics, culture, and more (as explored in seminal works like Fairclough, 1992, and Foucault, 1991). This process, characterized by a transformation from obscure 'backstage' concepts to prevalent 'frontstage' dialogues, encompasses a wide range of domains and genres (Wodak, 2021: 60). Wodak (2021) specifically notes that in the context of far-right populist leaders, a distinctive feature is shamelessness. This trait is often explicitly employed against mainstream media with the intention of undermining their credibility (Wodak and Culpeper 2021). To illustrate this phenomenon concretely, two examples from the Swedish context will be

⁵ It is worth noting in this context that Wodak (see, for instance, Wodak and Rheindorf 2021) argues for an overlap between right-wing populism and far-right gender and body politics, which are based on heteronormative, procreational gender roles and the ideal of national integrity as racially, ethnically, and culturally pure. This thesis has also observed similar tendencies, particularly in Paper II, although this has not been the primary focus.

illuminated, showcasing how it manifests in political discourse, particularly in the specific targeting of mainstream media:

Following the 2022 election, Linus Bylund, chief of staff for the Sweden Democrats (SD), who also serves on the board of the Administrative Foundation for Swedish Radio (SR), Swedish Television (SVT), and Educational Broadcasting (UR), in an interview with SVT, discussed engaging in “journalist rugby” or “pushing journalists around”. In an interview with *Aftonbladet*, he further asserted that the media should “dance to the party's tune” (Granström, 2022). Similarly, Björn Söder, an SD Member of Parliament, criticized SVT for a segment in their news program '*Aktuellt*', which featured Willy Silberstein, chair of the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism. Silberstein expressed concerns about the SD's electoral success and noted the connections of some party founders to Nazism. Söder aired his grievances on Twitter, stating, “Willy Silberstein is allowed on SVT to spout outright lies without any challenge. Absolutely incredible!” He further remarked, “SVT must really pull itself together and stop its pure propaganda broadcasts. Tonight's '*Aktuellt*' should be immediately reported for bias. Public service broadcasting must undergo a fundamental reform!” as elaborated in another tweet⁶.

A couple of weeks before the printing of this thesis, the investigative journalistic program '*Kalla Fakta*' on TV4 revealed, in a four-part series, that the communications department of the Sweden Democrats operates several anonymous accounts on social media, used under great secrecy to spread the party's propaganda⁷. This includes misleading information, xenophobic and conspiratorial messages—even messages from the white power movement—orchestrated smear campaigns against individuals deemed undesirable by the party (for instance, journalists), and the systematic demonization of political opponents. Although this program elicited concerning reactions and garnered significant attention in the Swedish media, the party's handling of this review is perhaps even more troubling. The leader of the Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Åkesson, dismissed the whole issue as “a gigantic influence operation by the left-liberal clique” and declared that the party did not intend to stop using their

6 See news article: “Björn Söder (SD) kritiserar SVT: Propagandainslag.” SVT Nyheter, 14 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/bjorn-soder-sd-kritiserar-svt-propagandainslag>

7 “Undercover i trollfabriken,” TV4, aired 7 May 2024. <https://www.tv4play.se/program/cd339dace9a80bb132d9/kalla-fakta-undercover-i-trollfabriken>.

anonymous accounts, and was instead planning to start several new ones⁸. Thus, he effectively stated that the party would continue with its anonymous influence campaigns and smear operations at least until the next election (2026).

The rhetoric and behavior of members of the SD and the party's leader embody key strategies typical of right-wing populist discourse. They deftly create a pronounced division between 'us' (the party and its followers) and 'them' (the media and dissenting voices). This approach serves a dual purpose: to normalize aggressive attitudes toward the media and to undermine their credibility, thereby attempting to erode public trust—strikingly similar to the rhetoric used by figures such as Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi (refer to Wodak and Culpeper, 2020). While the SD's criticism of mainstream journalism, particularly public service companies, is not new, it has recently become more overt and explicit, as shown by the examples given above and in particular in relation to the recent revealing of systematic operations presented by TV4. Wodak points out the difference between being blatantly outspoken and being pragmatically explicit. In this context, the rhetoric of Bylund, Söder and Åkesson aligns with Wodak's analysis of right-wing populists' violations of the traditional moral order, which form a core part of their agenda of shameless normalization.

When viewed through the lens of shameless normalization, online harassment against journalists can be understood as more than just aggressive behavior. It can be seen as part of a collective mindset that embraces populist narratives and fosters a community logic that perpetuates such harassment. According to this perspective, online harassment is woven into a moral fabric that cloaks aggressive communication in the veil of ideological norms and values. As part of this tapestry, morality stands out as a concept extensively explored in sociopragmatism (see Gu 1990; Culpeper 2011; Terkourafi 2011). As a part of this research, it's vital to navigate the interconnected yet distinct terrains of 'morality' and 'moral order'. When we talk about social interactions, morality often surfaces as a guiding force, a normative projection that subtly shapes how we interact (Kádár et al., 2019). In contrast, moral order is akin to a social compass, a collective understanding that we carry from one scenario to the next (Domenici and Littlejohn 2006, as cited in Culpeper, 2011: 38). These moral orders, derived from universal moral values that vary across cultures (Spencer-

8 Sveriges Radio, "Kalla Fakta: Åkesson går till angrepp istället för att svara på frågor," accessed: <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/kalla-fakta-akesson-gar-till-angrepp-istallet-for-att-svara-pa-fragor>.

Oatey and Kádár, 2016), crystallize into more tangible forms, making them particularly accessible for empirical scrutiny. The potency of moral orders lies in their inherent charge; when disrupted or violated, they often trigger a cascade of moralizing judgments and, not infrequently, aggressive responses (Kádár et al., 2019).

In recent years, the field of impoliteness research has increasingly focused on the relationship between moral order and language aggression. This new direction, highlighted by the works of Culpeper (2011), Davies (2018), Georgakopoulou and Vasilaki (2018), Graham (2018), Kádár et al. (2019), Kádár and Haugh (2013), and Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2019), is reshaping the understanding of aggressive communication. Key contributors to this shift (Kádár et al., 2019), argue that aggression can be a means of communal restoration, especially when it resonates with the moral order of interaction. This viewpoint suggests that aggressors may reframe their actions within a moral context, viewing them as not only justified but ideologically sound. Further deepening this analysis, Kádár et al. (2019) integrate the sociological concept of 'moral aggression' into their discussion. This concept involves moral responses to injustices that are perceived as unfair, especially those infringing upon one's own or their group's values and norms, leading to aggressive conduct (Kramer and Messick 1998, p. 248).

In a similar vein, Culpeper (2011) posits that morality is “shaped not only by social norms but also by broader belief systems or ideologies about social organization” (p. 38). Consequently, moral values are perceived as significant components within ideological structures (Hitlin and Pinkston, 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár, 2021). Here, Van Dijk's (2006) multidisciplinary approach establishes a basis for viewing ideologies alongside their incorporated interactive and linguistic elements. It portrays ideologies as socially shared belief systems that fundamentally shape groups' attitudes, actions, and values—critical in forming the cognitive basis of group identity, discourse, and social practices. Van Dijk (2006) articulates that ideologies are chiefly expressed through language but also extend to broader social practices, such as domination and resistance. This framework is especially pertinent in analyzing ideological polarization in scenarios of online harassment, where harassers ('us') oppose their targets, journalists ('them'). Van Dijk (2006) underscores that ideological groups are best understood as collectivities defined by shared ideologies and corresponding social practices, resembling “communities of belief” more than organized groups with coordinated actions. As alluded to above, such value systems play a crucial role in framing and rationalizing the use of impolite and morally charged language.

In brief, the sociopragmatic elements suggest that online harassment against journalists represents a specific form of impoliteness, orchestrated within a moral order tied to populist and anti-press rhetoric, or “communities of belief”. Thus, in Paper III, co-authored by Linnea Gustafsson, the analysis focuses on, on the one hand, uncovering the predominant types of impoliteness used against Swedish journalists on Twitter, and, on the other hand, exploring the interplay between impoliteness and morality as discursive mechanisms for exerting destructive informal social control⁹. This is achieved through a categorization of linguistic impoliteness types based on Culpeper's (2011) model, which includes multiple categories of impoliteness (as referenced in Table 1 in Paper II), and a thematic discourse analysis.

The analysis in Paper II reveals that insults are the predominant form of impoliteness, suggesting that online harassment often involves lawful language while aiming to challenge journalists' social identity and diminish their perceived authority or stature. Furthermore, we demonstrate how online harassment is rooted in normative beliefs and ideologies, where journalists perceived to transgress the moral order of the beliefs of such online communities become the targets of conflict and morally condoned acts of aggression (Kádár et al., 2019). The tactics of this discourse involve targeting journalists' personal attributes—notably criticizing their intelligence, alleging political biases, hypocrisy, and detachment from reality—echoing the rhetoric of the SD politicians mentioned earlier. Additionally, it encompasses general critiques of journalistic professional practice and strategies that enforce morality, such as shaming and public humiliation.

In connection with the concept of social disorientation, it becomes evident that currents of populism and anti-press rhetoric, which previously remained more obscure from public scrutiny, have gained wider dissemination through the communicative possibilities of social media and the internet. This, in turn, leads to an interaction between political rhetoric against traditional media and the online harassment of journalists, creating a situation that influences the online discussion climate and complicates the handling of these issues by relevant institutional bodies.

⁹ See Kienpointner (2018) for a similar analysis of the strategies and techniques of hate speech in online discourse, linked to social, cultural, and political contexts.

Neo-Institutional Theory and Media Management: Understanding Organizational Dynamics in Addressing Online Harassment

Over the past three decades, neo-institutional organizational theory has cemented its role in the analysis of organizational dynamics and influenced a range of social science disciplines, including economics, sociology, and political science (Vogel, 2012). Central to this theory is the premise that organizations, both consciously and unconsciously, adapt in response to the expectations and demands of their environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). It assumes that organizations reduce external uncertainties about their identity, values, and objectives. The goal of these adaptations is to secure legitimacy, credibility, and esteem—all of which are crucial for the survival and success of any organization (Power, 1997, 2007; Lynn, 2005). In practice, this involves the adoption of solutions, activities, units, models, and behavioral patterns that are perceived as effective, necessary, and ethically sound. However, it's important to note that these perceptions may not always align with the actual efficacy or necessity of these adopted practices.

According to Scott (2008, p. 56), institutions are composed of regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive elements alongside associated activities and resources, collectively contributing to the stability and meaning of social life. In other words, institutions or organizations demonstrate stabilizing and meaning-making properties due to the influence of these regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive elements. These elements serve as foundational building blocks of institutional structures, acting like elastic fibers that guide behavior and resist change (Scott, 2008).

Building on this theoretical foundation, Paper II explores, in-depth, the perceptions and responses of media managers and news organizations to online harassment directed at their journalists. At an abstract level, institutional theory explains the persistence of organizational patterns, the elusiveness of transformative shifts in established fields, and the dynamics of institutionalization (Scott, 2008). Contextually, it helps to uncover the reasons behind media managers' perspectives on online harassment and offers insights into their handling of the issue from a work environment standpoint. In this context, institutional theory sheds light on the underlying logic of news organizations' approaches to addressing online harassment and managing the challenges associated with cultural change from the top down, which have

been identified as obstacles within journalism (Ekdale et al., 2015; Ryfe, 2013; 2019).

Expanding on this theme, Scott (2008) portrays institutions as robust and complex social structures, infused with symbolic elements, social engagements, and tangible resources, which influence day-to-day operations. This depiction further elaborates on how institutions generate expectations that dictate legitimate actions for organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), shape the logic through which laws and rules are interpreted, and determine how behavioral expectations are perceived as natural and binding (Zucker, 1977; 1987). This framework explains institutions' capacity to define appropriate or legitimate behavior, determine what qualifies as acceptable, and deem certain actions unacceptable or beyond consideration (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Among the institutional pillars (regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive), only the regulative elements emerge as constraints (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010), highlighting the multi-faceted nature of institutional influence.

In essence, the regulatory pillar comprises rules that create coercive and restrictive conditions. This category includes laws, regulations, stipulations, and prohibitions, which explicitly compel organizations and individuals to either engage in or refrain from specific behaviors and activities, often under the threat of sanctions. However, as noted by socio-legal scholars (e.g., Suchman and Edelman, 1996; Ellickson, 1998; Drobak, 2006; Hydén and Svensson, 2008), the ambiguity in the phrasing of laws can lead to them not providing clear behavioral directives, meaning that the influence of laws often relies more on cognitive and normative interpretations than on coercive elements alone. Simply put, the interpretation of rules is crucial. Thus, normative and cognitive aspects often provide a broader interpretative scope than strict regulatory measures alone.

The literature on normative forces has its roots in analyses of social groups, including families, social classes, and religious systems, where shared values are more common than direct governing and coercive forces (Scott, 2008). Over time, it has become clear that these mechanisms also influence how businesses, administrations, and other types of organizations function. This results in the emergence of ideas and expectations that advocate for desirable, ideal, or morally correct behavior. The emergence of routines, conventions, and roles in relation to organizational forms, structures, and techniques creates institutional movements that prescribe certain models, methods, and ideals. Thus, normative structures, enveloped by values and norms, dictate goals, means, and the legitimacy of their pursuit (Scott, 2008). Generally, social

norms delineate behavioral boundaries. Adherence to or deviation from these norms triggers introspective evaluations, fostering a sense of shame among transgressors and esteem among conformists, thus guiding behavioral tendencies. For instance, in journalism, the stigmatization and perception of online harassment as a natural part of the job exemplify how conventional behavioral constraints, anchored in social norms, can manifest even in professional environments. Such manifestations of social norms also interact dynamically with cognitive structures within the institution, influencing not only individual behaviors but also organizational strategies and responses (Scott, 2008).

The cultural–cognitive pillar, representing the third dimension of institutional theory, is influenced by insights from various fields, notably anthropology and sociology. From this perspective, cultural–cognitive elements in institutions revolve around shared conceptions that define social reality and frame the creation of meaning. Scott (2008, p. 35) highlights how organizational groups, like employers, generally adhere to specific behavioral paradigms within an organizational context. The cognitive component emphasizes the sense-making function: individuals and organizations navigate social routines through ingrained expectations of “the way things are done around here” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). Practices are shaped not just by regulative or normative directives but also by an entity's cognitive integration of its sociocultural environment and industry ties. Echoing Weber's views, Scott argues that understanding or explaining any action requires considering both the objective conditions and the actor's subjective interpretation. The affective dimension of this pillar manifests in feelings ranging from certainty and confidence to confusion or disorientation. Actors aligned with prevailing cultural beliefs typically feel competent and connected, while those who are not may be perceived as 'clueless,' or at worst, 'crazy.' The cultural–cognitive conception emphasizes the vital role of socially mediated construction in forming a shared framework of meanings.

Building on this understanding of the cultural–cognitive aspect, Scott (2008) further highlights that practices in stable social systems persist and are reinforced because they are often taken for granted, endorsed by prevailing norms, and supported by authoritative powers. This observation suggests that when the regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars align, they collectively exert a formidable influence. On the other hand, misalignment among these elements can lead to upheaval and conflict, potentially instigating institutional change (Scott, 2008; Strang and Sine, 2002). Thus, while regulative, normative, and cognitive conditions may vary greatly, recognizing them as

analytical constructs is crucial. They serve as guides to foster a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of practices within news organizations.

In addition to recognizing the aligned influence of regulatory, normative, and cognitive conditions, it is equally relevant to address the gap in understanding how organizational actors interpret and implement external institutional demands related to the work environment. However, research in the work environment predominantly focuses on individual-level exposure to health risks or regulatory responses at societal or sectoral levels. This focus has led to a dearth of in-depth studies at the organizational level (Zanko and Dawson, 2012; Madsen and Hasle, 2017). A notable exception is Hasle et al. (2014), who provide a theoretical model that sheds light on how work environment interventions function within organizational contexts. Their model, influenced in part by DiMaggio and Powell's neo-institutionalism theory (1983), places a strong emphasis on institutional isomorphism—the similarity between institutions. However, as Scott (2008, p. 188) notes, relying solely on structural isomorphism to identify institutional processes risks oversimplifying the complexities and nuances of social systems. Therefore, it is important to consider both structural isomorphism and agency when attempting to understand institutional processes.

In the field of journalism, this framework has been instrumental in understanding, for instance, media governance (Donges, 2007) and the dynamics of media production and dissemination (Asp, 2017). Similarly, Msimanga et al. (2023) have utilized aspects of this framework to investigate how news organizations handle sexual harassment against female journalists within workplaces in Southern African countries. However, when it comes to online harassment originating from sources external to the workplace, there is a notable lack of studies that explicitly adopt an organizational perspective on this issue.

Taking into account the introductory chapter's highlight of the extensive scholarly discourse on journalists' experiences, both in the Nordic regions and internationally, there remains a gap in understanding how managers and employers view online harassment targeting their journalistic staff, particularly from a work environment perspective. Paper III seeks to enrich the narrative on workplace violence and cyberbullying in occupational studies by delving into this underexplored area. It specifically examines how Swedish media managers, including executives, editors-in-chief, and publishers from local and national news outlets, interpret and address work-related challenges from online harassment targeting their journalists. Utilizing insights from an interview study, Paper III employs institutional theory (Scott, 2008) as an

analytical lens to examine entrenched structures, norms, and practices concerning how news organizations handle the work environment challenges of online harassment.

In short, Paper III reveals that workplace strategies aiming to mitigate the adverse effects of online harassment are influenced by the normative and cultural frameworks of journalistic institutions. Media managers, adhering to regulative expectations, often prioritize traditional journalistic values and norms, thereby frequently overlooking the necessity to systematically address non-physical aspects of harassment, such as mental well-being. This bias, therefore, often results in neglecting the psychological impacts of online harassment. Despite the growing awareness of mental health's importance within the industry, a gap persists in addressing the subtler effects of online harassment. Paper III exposes a misalignment between normative practices, traditionally focused on physical safety, and the evolving digital pressure confronting journalists today. This misalignment, resulting in a skewed prioritization where psychological harm is often minimized, mirrors the broader theme of social disorientation. It underscores how the changing landscape of digital journalism is out of sync with existing institutional structures and norms regarding the management of work-related issues.

Unraveling Self-Censorship: Psychological Dispositions and Social Conformity in the Face of Online Harassment

As emphasized in the introductory chapter, the prevalence of self-censorship among journalists facing online harassment is well-established, yet the factors that either mitigate or amplify this behavior remain largely unexplored. Moving beyond the specific context of journalism and online harassment, self-censorship emerges as a widely researched phenomenon across various social contexts and academic disciplines. This body of research characterizes self-censorship as situations where individuals consciously or subconsciously restrain their speech or expression without the presence of formal speech restrictions from external entities. This is in stark contrast to state censorship, where speech restrictions are enforced by government or legal institutions. Consequently, the reasons behind self-censorship are influenced by a blend of internal and external factors. These can encompass a wide range of contexts, from everyday social interactions (Roberts and Nason, 2011) and conflict

resolution (Bar-Tal, 2017; Shahar et al., 2018), to workplace dynamics (Detert and Edmondson, 2011), and the expression of public opinions (Hayes et al., 2010; Filak, 2012; Chan, 2018), among others.

In broader terms, research on self-censorship is commonly categorized into two distinct areas: an instinctual–psychological disposition and behavior driven by social conformity. The first category views self-censorship as an inherent psychological tendency where individuals instinctively limit their expression to avoid conflict or harm. This instinctual–psychological disposition is often likened to the fight-or-flight response, a fundamental mechanism in human psychology (initially coined by Cannon in 1915) and a key concept in stress research (McCarty 2016). Within this context, the fight-or-flight response serves as a metaphor for how individuals react to perceived threats in their social and communicative environments. When confronted with potential conflict or harm—be it criticism, social ostracism, or professional repercussions—an individual's instinctual response might be to 'fight' by asserting their views despite potential risks or to 'flee' through self-censorship to evade these perceived dangers.

This reaction encompasses more than just physical threats, extending into psychological and emotional domains. Opting for self-censorship ('flight') represents a form of psychological self-preservation aimed at protecting one's sense of safety, identity, and social belonging. This response is deeply ingrained in the individual's psyche, influenced by both innate temperament and accumulated life experiences. For instance, a person who has previously encountered negative consequences for expressing their opinions may be more inclined towards self-censorship in future scenarios. Similarly, individuals with a naturally risk-averse personality may be more inclined to choose the 'flight' response as their default mechanism in potentially conflicting situations (McCarty 2016). Therefore, the fight-or-flight analogy in the context of self-censorship emphasizes this behavior's automatic and reflexive nature. It suggests that self-censorship, from this perspective, is often not a conscious choice but an instinctual response to the intricate combination of internal fears, external pressures, and the individual's psychological composition.

The second category views self-censorship as a response to external social factors driven by the desire for social conformity. From this perspective, individuals adjust their expressions to align with their community's norms, values, or expectations. This type of self-censorship, motivated by the need for social belonging, acceptance, or to avoid ostracization, is utilized as a strategic tool for navigating and balancing personal expression within the larger social framework. It is seen as a strategic adaptation to the social environment, where

individuals modify or withhold their expressions to correspond with group dynamics or societal standards. This approach underscores the influence of the social milieu on personal expression, demonstrating how the collective ethos can exert a subtle yet persistent pressure on individual choices and behaviors. Consequently, self-censorship in this context is employed to negotiate the complex landscape of social interactions, striking a balance between personal authenticity and social integration.

As for this perspective, Jonathan Penney's recent Social Conformity theory of Chilling Effects (2022) is relevant. Presented in his 2022 article 'Understanding Chilling Effects', this theory critiques the legal perspectives on chilling effects, traditionally based on rational choice and deterrence theory (Schauer 1978), focusing on self-censorship due to fears of legal repercussions. Penney contends that the traditional legal framework for understanding chilling effects has largely neglected valuable insights from other social sciences. Although the broader field of law and economics has incorporated interdisciplinary knowledge since the 1990s, such integration is still lacking in contemporary discussions about chilling effects (Kendrick 2013). Penney posits that chilling effects should not be seen merely as absences—like silence or inactivity—but as active influences shaping human behavior. Penney (2022) distinguishes chilling effects from mere self-censorship, arguing that while both concepts are fundamentally analogous—each describing how individuals modify or restrain their behavior or expression in response to perceived social pressures—chilling effects encompass a broader scope of influence.

Penney's (2022) theory effectively posits that chilling effects are best understood as acts of compliance with, or conformity to, social norms, especially in contexts marked by ambiguity, such as legal gray areas or situations involving potential government surveillance. Consider, for example, a scenario where an individual limits their willingness to express opinions or engage in certain activities due to uncertainty about how others might react. In these instances, the prevailing ambiguity leads to hesitancy in determining the most suitable course of action. Penney (2022) argues that in order to alleviate the discomfort caused by this uncertainty, individuals tend to conform to perceived societal norms. This concept is supported by extensive research across various disciplines, including social psychology (Pfafftheicher and Keller 2015; Conty, George, and Hietanen 2016), political science (Noelle-Neumann 1984; Scheufle and Moy 2000), surveillance studies (Starr et al. 2008; Penney 2016; Stevens et al. 2023), and socio-legal studies, which often view social norms as parallel or alternative regulatory systems to formal legal frameworks (Ellickson 1991; Sunstein 1996; Drobak 2006; Hydén and

Svensson 2008). However, it is noteworthy that while socio-legal research tends to overlook the role of uncertainty as a key behavioral driver, social psychological literature prominently features it, linking individual uncertainty to a heightened susceptibility to social influences (Sherif 1936; Festinger 1976; Pfeffer, Salancik, and Leblebici 1976; Hogg 2000; Smith et al. 2007).

This dual perspective of self-censorship—encompassing both an instinctual—psychological disposition and behavior influenced by social conformity—forms the basis of the empirical inquiry of Paper IV. This study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to resilience against self-censorship induced by online harassment, as well as the factors that exacerbate it, leading to withdrawal and reluctance among journalists. Specifically, Paper IV empirically examines the relationship between self-censorship and fear, operationalized through its impact on mental health, alongside factors related to social conformity. While the connection to fear is direct, the aspect of social conformity is operationalized by testing the influence of social norms and uncertainty, drawing on Penney's theory. Additionally, the study enhances Penney's framework by incorporating the concept of attitudes (Ajzen, 1991), thereby enriching the analysis of self-censorship dynamics with a vital element from social psychological research on human behavior. In this framework, attitudes are defined as the individual's positive or negative evaluations of performing a particular behavior.

In summary, the findings of Paper IV indicate that self-censorship among journalists, particularly in the context of online harassment, is predominantly an individually driven behavior. The analysis revealed a correlation between the negative health impacts experienced by journalists due to online harassment and their subsequent self-censorship behaviors. Notably, there was a clear distinction in self-censorship behaviors between journalists who experienced negative health impacts and those who did not. Regarding the influence of social conformity on self-censorship, the results were generally weaker and more varied. It emerged that attitude- and uncertainty-related variables, especially those linked to internal factors like personal health concerns, emotional responses to negative feedback, and individual resilience, were primary influencers in self-censorship decisions. Conversely, the influence of social norms on these decisions was less pronounced, thereby presenting a challenge to Penney's (2022) conceptual framework of chilling effects in this specific empirical context.

Methodology

This chapter presents the fundamental research design of this thesis, encompassing a mixed-method multiple triangulation strategy and detailing three distinct methods. I also discuss the ethical considerations integral to this research. Additionally, the chapter offers a reflection of the research's strengths, limitations, and delimitations, providing a comprehensive understanding of the methodological framework and its implications.

Employing a Multiple Triangulation Research Design

In recent years, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods to study a single phenomenon has become an increasingly popular element in research designs across various fields. Some researchers suggest considering this integrative approach as a third distinct research methodology, alongside conventional qualitative and quantitative methods. This evolving approach has been given various names, including “multi-strategy” (Bryman, 2016), “multi-methods” (Brannen, 1917), “mixed methodology” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998), and “mixed methods” (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Among these, the classic approach of method integration, commonly known as “triangulation”, originates in the social sciences and in the work of Campbell and Fiske (1959) and their concept of “multiple operationism” to validate research results. Distinguished by its specific objectives, triangulation seeks to reveal the complementarity, convergence, and potential dissonance among research findings, thus providing a more holistic understanding of the studied phenomena (Hussein, 2009).

Divergent views exist regarding the purpose of employing triangulation in research. Scholars like Olsen (2004) suggest its purpose is to broaden and deepen the understanding of the studied phenomenon. In contrast, others, including Denzin (1978) and Golafshani (2003), advocate for its use in enhancing the accuracy and validity of research findings. To bridge both perspectives, Creswell and Miller (2000) define triangulation as “a validity

procedure where researchers look for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study.”

Researchers commonly distinguish between five distinct types of triangulation: methodological, investigator, theoretical, analysis, and data triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Kimchi, Polivka, and Stevenson, 1991). When a researcher incorporates more than one of these types in a single study, it is referred to as ‘multiple triangulation’ (Polit and Hungler, 1995). This thesis exemplifies a multiple triangulation strategy by adopting multiple theoretical perspectives and using three different methods, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In essence, by combining these forms of triangulation, the research gains not only robustness and credibility (through methodological triangulation) but also greater depth and breadth of understanding (through theoretical triangulation). Furthermore, this approach aligns well with the nature of socio-legal research, which thrives on heterogeneity and openness to diverse disciplinary backgrounds, thereby challenging rigid disciplinary boundaries (Cotterrell, 2017).

Data and Methods

After establishing the foundational framework of the triangulation approach, it becomes crucial to clearly outline the thesis’s specific methods. These methods were selected for their complementary nature, enabling a thorough investigation of the research questions associated with the four papers. This approach directly supports the overarching aim of the thesis: to deepen our understanding of how the evolving digital landscape, especially the increasing prevalence of online harassment, impacts journalism and its role in promoting a healthy public discourse.

Following a foundational socio-legal approach, the methodology captures the interaction between theoretical assumptions and research methods, indicating that methods of inquiry are always founded on certain epistemological assumptions about social reality (Banakar, 2015). In this thesis, an empirical epistemology is deployed, requiring the use of social scientific methods in the study of legally relevant phenomena, ensuring that the investigation is grounded in empirical evidence and sensory experience.

The three methods utilized in this thesis are:

- **Survey Study:** This method facilitates an understanding of journalists' trust in the legal system when confronting unlawful online harassment. It examines the frequency with which journalists encounter different types of online harassment, as well as the impact of such harassment on their well-being and instances of self-censorship. The results from this survey study are utilized in Papers I and IV.
- **Twitter Thematic Discourse Analysis:** Through a machine learning process developed within this PhD project, the second method involves an in-depth qualitative analysis of insulting tweets directed towards Swedish journalists. The results from this analysis are utilized in Papers II and IV.
- **Interview Study:** This final method entails interviews with 14 media managers across different news organizations in Sweden. The results from this study are used in Papers III and IV.

In the context of the triangulated research design, the three methods are convergent, meaning each method seamlessly interconnects, enriching and reinforcing the findings of the others. The following sections will explore each method in detail, elucidating its implementation, the nature of the data it generates, and its integration into the overall research design.

Survey Study

The study was conducted in collaboration with the Swedish Union of Journalists, who were contacted at the beginning of the project to participate in the research. They contributed by providing an email list of active members, to whom the survey was then subsequently distributed. Following approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, an online survey was conducted from December 17, 2020, to January 14, 2021. The survey, sent to 9603 active members of the Swedish Union of Journalists, garnered 3042 responses, resulting in a response rate of 31.5 percent.

During the preparatory phase, a pilot study was carried out with two sample groups: one consisting of 30 journalism students and a teacher from Lund University, and another comprised of colleagues from the Sociology of Law Department at the same university. The data from the pilot study were utilized to refine the survey, leading to the selection of reliable and valid questions for the final iteration. In other words, some questions were discarded or rephrased. Additionally, a soft launch targeting 100 respondents was conducted before

deploying the survey to the entire sample, aiming to minimize misunderstandings about the study's design and questions.

Moreover, participants were informed via email about the study one week prior to the survey's launch. In this informational email, they were instructed not to participate if their work did not expose them to the risk of online harassment. This guideline was reiterated on the first page of the survey. While there are no precise data available, it is reasonable to estimate, based on previous studies and reports (cf. Hedman, 2016; Ekberg et al., 2018), that the number of journalists in Sweden at risk of exposure to online harassment due to their job responsibilities is between 3000 and 6000.

The survey's respondent demographics offer a comprehensive overview of the journalism profession in Sweden. The majority of participants, 62%, held permanent positions. Freelancers represented a significant portion at 22%, reflecting the varied nature of employment in modern journalism. Those in temporary roles constituted a smaller, yet notable, segment of the workforce. Regarding professional roles, reporters and video reporters comprised the largest group, accounting for 54% of respondents. Editors across various formats (video, print, and section) followed at 26%, with columnists making up 21%. The survey also included photographers/photojournalists, program hosts/broadcasters, chroniclers, editors-in-chief, publishers, and lead writers, ensuring a diverse representation of professional roles. Respondents were distributed across various media outlets, with the daily press being the most common at 29%, followed by weekly/monthly magazines and radio.

The gender distribution among respondents was fairly balanced, with females representing 54% and males 46%. Non-binary individuals and other gender identities constituted a small fraction of the sample. The respondents' age distribution was varied, with the largest group being those aged 46–55 years at 29%, followed by the 36–45 years and 56–65 years age brackets. The survey encompassed both younger and older journalists, providing a broad age range in the data. Around 16% of respondents reported having a foreign background, compared to 83% who did not, with a small percentage opting not to answer.

Geographically, the respondents were mainly concentrated in Sweden's three largest cities—Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö—with Stockholm being particularly prominent. This distribution aligns with findings from branch-mapping reports (Ekberg et al., 2018), indicating a similar geographical spread in the profession.

Table 1. Professional demographics¹⁰

| Form of employment | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Permanent employment | 1905 | 62% |
| Freelance | 675 | 22% |
| Temporary position | 183 | 6% |
| Temporary employment | 169 | 5% |
| Other | 153 | 5% |
| Probationary employment | 4 | 0% |
| Trainee | 3 | 0% |
| Professional role | <i>n</i> | Percent |
| Reporter/video reporter | 1666 | 54% |
| Editor (video, print and section) | 794 | 26% |
| Columnist | 650 | 21% |
| Another role(s) | 542 | 18% |
| Photographer/photojournalist | 391 | 13% |
| Program host/broadcaster | 260 | 8% |
| Chronicler | 227 | 7% |
| Editor in chief | 139 | 4% |
| Publisher | 111 | 4% |
| Lead writer | 64 | 2% |
| Workplace outlets | <i>n</i> | Percent |
| Daily press | 1082 | 29% |
| Daily evening press | 221 | 6% |
| Weekly-/monthly magazines | 597 | 16% |
| Radio | 538 | 14% |
| Online paper | 370 | 10% |
| Television | 508 | 14% |
| Other workplace outlets | 412 | 11% |

¹⁰ The respondents had the opportunity to provide more than one answerer concerning their professional role and workplace outlet.

Table 2. Demographic data.

| Gender | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|---------------------|----------|---------|
| Female | 1640 | 54% |
| Male | 1384 | 46% |
| Non-binary | 3 | 0% |
| Other options | 4 | 0% |
| No answer given | 11 | 0% |
| Age | <i>n</i> | Percent |
| 18–25 years | 79 | 3% |
| 26–35 years | 573 | 19% |
| 36–45 years | 681 | 22% |
| 46–55 years | 892 | 29% |
| 56–65 years | 693 | 23% |
| Older than 65 years | 124 | 4% |
| Foreign background | <i>n</i> | Percent |
| Yes | 489 | 16% |
| No | 2525 | 83% |
| No answer given | 17 | 1% |
| Place of residence | <i>n</i> | Percent |
| Gothenburg | 223 | 7% |
| Malmö | 189 | 6% |
| Stockholm | 1303 | 43% |
| Other municipality | 1327 | 44% |

Survey Design

The survey design was based on three variable clusters:

(1) A variable cluster based on the Negative Act Questionnaire (hereafter shortened to NAQ) (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009). In short, NAQ is a behavior experience method that includes a self-labeling approach where respondents assess their perception of being victimized. This study used NAQ as a single-item question to determine how frequently the respondents had experienced illegal and other forms of harassment during the last three years. More precisely, this part of the study included short descriptions developed by The Swedish Internet Foundation¹¹ to explain the meaning and definition of commonly occurring crimes online. The following seven crimes were included in the study; defamation (*förtal*), insulting conduct (*förolämpning*), unlawful

¹¹ See The Swedish Internet Foundation website:
<https://internetstiftelsen.se/guide/motverka-natmobbing/vad-ar-brottsligt/>

threat (*olaga hot*), molestation (*ofredande*), sexual abuse (*sexuellt ofredande*), hate speech (*hets mot folkgrupp*), unlawful invasion of privacy (*olaga integritetsintrång*), and one question concerning harassing—but not technically—illegal forms of online hate. These variables provided a general indication of the direction and frequency of online harassment encountered early in the project.

(2) A variable cluster focusing on self-censorship, health, and trust in the legal system. This section included questions about journalists' self-estimated levels of self-censorship, the direct health impact of online hate, and trust in the legal system when exposed to online unlawful harassment. In the context of self-censorship, two questions were formulated to ascertain how frequently journalists had (a) refrained from reporting on a topic and (b) altered their reporting to avoid online hatred or threats (i.e., harassment). The health-related variable was operationalized by asking about the frequency of negative health impacts experienced due to exposure to online harassment, viewed as manifestations of fear in alignment with the examination of its relationship with self-censorship in Paper IV. For assessing trust in the legal system, participants were posed the following multiple-choice question: 'Imagine that you have recently been exposed to any of the crimes just described (referring to the seven commonly occurring online crimes outlined in the previous variable cluster) in your role as a journalist. To what extent do you believe the judicial system is capable of protecting your interests as a crime victim?' Following this, participants were encouraged to further elaborate on their views in an open-ended question: 'Please feel free to elaborate on your views regarding the legal conditions for journalists subjected to threats and hatred.' The multiple-choice and open-ended questions regarding trust in the legal system constituted the empirical material used in Paper I.

(3) A variable cluster included the presentation of a descriptive scenario depicting a journalist subjected to online harassment. This scenario was strategically employed to ground questions related to attitudes, perceptions of normative support, and perceived levels of control in a tangible and relatable context (Steiner et al., 2016). This survey segment was dedicated to examining the relationship between self-censorship and social conformity, in line with Penney's (2022) social conformity theory of chilling effects. It specifically aimed to investigate how attitudes, social norms, and perceived control—or their absence, particularly in terms of uncertainty—influence decisions regarding self-censorship. To gauge attitudes, respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with various potential reactions to online harassment. Social norms were assessed through respondents'

perceptions of their community's reactions to the risks associated with publishing in an environment of potential online harassment. The analysis of uncertainty centered on journalists' perceived ability to continue publishing despite online harassment, considering both personal attributes, like self-efficacy, and external factors, such as support from their workplace and the legal system. The separate variables connected to each of these categories are detailed in Paper IV and were tested through regression analyses with self-censorship, as well as the relationship between self-censorship and the experience of fear, manifested through adverse health effects.

Twitter Thematic Discourse Analysis

User-generated content containing offensive language has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in recent years. From a scientific perspective, this interest is fueled by the potential for large-scale analysis and opinion extraction. However, navigating the detection and analysis of such language is complex due to the vast amount of data involved. Consequently, automatic methods employing Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning techniques are essential. In this thesis, collaboration with Språkbanken has been established to assist in detecting, storing, and analyzing data. Initially, the data collection aimed to conduct both qualitative and quantitative large-scale analyses. Nevertheless, due to time constraints and the integration of two other research methods, this thesis has been primarily limited to a qualitative analysis of the collected data, with the inclusion of a quantitative element in relation to research question one in Paper II. Therefore, the methodological description in this section is specifically tailored to the qualitative analysis conducted in this thesis.

To detect offensive language, the first step is identifying the primary characteristics of the data and selecting an appropriate platform for extraction. Twitter has been chosen for this purpose. Although Twitter is not the most widely used social media platform in Sweden, utilized by only around a quarter of all internet users (Andersson, Bäck, and Ernbrandt 2020), it is heavily utilized by journalists (Hedman 2020) and is a primary platform for opinion manipulation in Sweden (Bradshaw and Howard 2019). Twitter's unique features—including retweets, hashtags, and direct messaging—facilitate direct communication among users. The direct messaging function is particularly relevant as it allows for immediate interactions between journalists and other

users. Additionally, Twitter's interface is well-suited for collecting large amounts of data, making it an ideal choice for this study.

In terms of data characteristics, a list of approximately 2100 journalists, encompassing Twitter (@) usernames and real names (first and last names), was compiled. All these journalists were, at the time of data collection, active on Twitter. They were identified through a snowball sampling technique, drawing on Hedman's (2016) prior work. This process involved systematically searching for journalists on Twitter and analyzing their follower lists to ensure diversity. The focus was on including journalists from various workplace outlets, job descriptions, and levels of Twitter activity. This method allowed for assembling a broad and diverse range of journalist profiles, essential for the comprehensive analysis required in this study.

Data collection process

While the list of journalists provided a valid starting point for analyzing communication directed towards them, specific steps were needed to narrow down content that was harassing in character. This endeavor necessitated a two-step process to collect a manageable amount of data for qualitative analysis.

In the first stage, a list of 20 insulting or impolite words was developed (refer to Table 3). This word list was then integrated with a Swedish word vector, employing machine learning techniques. This process, known as word-embedding, involved displaying words similar to those on the list within Prodigy's¹² annotation tool interface for binary categorization: 'Yes' for impolite words and 'No' for words not considered impolite. This resulted in a lexicon comprising 500 impolite words.

In the second stage, the lexicon from the word-embedding process was utilized to identify and categorize entire tweets. Tweets were presented in the annotation interface and classified as either impolite or not, with an 'ignore function' available for tweets that were too complex to classify. This step served a dual purpose: training the model to recognize impolite tweets against journalists through annotation and preparing data for use in Paper II. The tweets annotated in this stage were based on the word-embedding process outlined in the first step.

¹² Prodigy is an annotation tool for AI, machine learning, and natural language processing extensively used in scientific research (Neves and Seva, 2021).

This second stage was executed in two phases to both train the model and leverage data for Paper II. During the first phase, 10,000 tweets mentioning at least one of the 2052 Swedish journalists identified in the previously mentioned list were collected from a random sample between January 1, 2019, and February 28, 2022. These were annotated by myself and a student recruited from Gothenburg University. The inter-rater reliability between the two annotators in this phase achieved a Cohen's kappa score of 60%, indicating a moderate level of agreement. Following this, both annotators reviewed and discussed challenges faced during the initial annotation. This led to the second phase, which involved annotating a random sample of 5955 tweets gathered between February 14, 2018, and May 31, 2022. In this phase, the inter-rater reliability (Cohen's kappa score) improved significantly to 79%, reflecting substantial agreement between the annotators. Of the 5955 tweets, both annotators independently classified 14% ($n=826$ and $n=821$, respectively) as impolite. There were 563 instances where both annotators agreed on a tweet being impolite. After eliminating duplicates, a total of 555 tweets were retained for the analysis.

This process was, in turn, informed by an annotation scheme¹³ that was developed based on Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness model and influenced by Neurauter-Kessels' (2011) categorization of offensive communication that impugns the authority, credibility, and trustworthiness of the recipient journalist. Accordingly, in the annotation scheme, impoliteness was broadly delineated as the expression of unfavorable sentiments (Culpeper, 2011) directed towards the journalists or their behavior, the realm of professional journalism, or specific social groups that the targeted journalists were believed to belong to; for instance, immigrants. The purpose of annotation was, in other words, to classify a wide range of negative (read: impolite) communication against journalists. Here, it is crucial to emphasize that the tweets levied at journalists were examined within their interactional context. Specifically, in the annotation tool used for this process, the tweets directed towards journalists were displayed alongside the initial tweet that initiated the conversation thread and the subsequent reply from the journalist.

¹³ In this context, an annotation scheme acts as a structured guide, enabling annotators to systematically identify and classify instances of impoliteness in tweets directed at journalists. This is achieved by employing predefined criteria and categories.

Table 3. The initial list of 20 insulting or impolite words.¹⁴

| Original Swedish word list | Approximate translation in English |
|---|--|
| <i>Svin, Idiot, Döda, Äckel, Hora, Bög, Knulla, Fitta, Skjutas, Kuk, Nackskott, Lögnare, Fiender, Slödder, Sjuk, Korkad. Dumma, Hjärndöd, Ointelligent, Ful</i> | Pig, Idiot, Kill, Disgusting, Whore, Gay, Fuck, Pussy, Shoot, Executing, Liar, Enemies, Trash, Sick, Stupid, Dumb, Brain-dead, Unintelligent, Ugly |

Analytical procedure

As mentioned above, 555 impolite tweets were selected from the second round of annotations for qualitative analysis. These tweets were subsequently analyzed through two distinct, yet interconnected, processes related to the two research questions posed in Paper II:

- What are the predominant types of impoliteness used against Swedish journalists on Twitter, and in what manner do they act as instruments of harm and restraint?
- How do impoliteness and morality interplay as discursive mechanisms for exerting destructive informal social control over Swedish journalists on Twitter?

The two questions serve different functions in relation to the data. The analysis pertaining to the first question illuminates the nuanced ways in which impoliteness manifests in online interactions targeting journalists. By categorizing and dissecting these interactions, it offers insights into the tactics and strategies employed in online harassment. Additionally, it provides a framework for recognizing and addressing the subtleties of such harassment. Essentially, the first research question concentrates on categorizing various types of impoliteness based on Culpeper's (2011) model, which includes multiple impolite categories (as referenced in Table 4).

According to this model (the same model that informs the annotation scheme outlined above), impoliteness is broadly defined as exhibiting unfavorable attitudes towards specific behaviors within a given context. It can be further divided into conventional and implicational categories. Conventional

¹⁴ The words in this list were chosen through discussions with Språkbanken, leveraging their expertise in creating similar lists for related objectives. This was complemented by collaboration with the organization Näthatsgranskaren, who contributed a list of common terms used in hateful communications against journalists, based on their non-profit work across various platforms.

impoliteness refers to utterances that are regarded as impolite regardless of context, encompassing nine established forms. Implicational impoliteness, on the other hand, pertains to utterances that may not be overtly impolite but can be perceived as such depending on the context. This type of impoliteness is characterized by a disparity between the surface form or semantics of an utterance and its deeper understanding or symbolic meaning (Culpeper, 2011, p. 17). These expressions, intentionally face-threatening, often act as precursors to further impoliteness, typically manifesting as insinuations, innuendos, snide remarks, teasing, sarcasm, or similar expressions.

To categorize the impolite tweets in accordance with Culpeper's (2011) model, both authors of Paper II independently classified the 555 tweets obtained from the annotation process described earlier. Subsequent discussions and comparisons of their classifications led to a consensus. A specific constraint was applied: each tweet was limited to one occurrence of a particular type of impoliteness. Therefore, a single tweet could, for instance, contain just one instance of an insult, but it could also encompass one or more different types of impoliteness formulae.

Table 4: Conventional and implicational impoliteness (after Culpeper 2011)

| Impoliteness category | Types of impoliteness |
|-----------------------|---|
| Conventional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insults (<i>e.g., you fucking moron/liar/loser, you are so/such a shit/hypocrite/pathetic, you stinking/little shit, etc.</i>) - Pointed criticism/complaints (<i>criticism toward a third party or group</i>) - Unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions (<i>negatively-phrased questions intended to antagonize the recipient</i>) - Condescension (<i>e.g., you're being babyish/childish, stupid little girl, etc.</i>) - Message enforcers (<i>e.g., profanity and swearing</i>) - Dismissals (<i>e.g., go away, get lost/etc.</i>) - Silencers (<i>e.g., shut up</i>) - Threats (<i>e.g., I swear on everything when I get hold of you, I'll strangle you, you're a disgusting fascist cunt</i>) - Negative expressive (<i>ill wishes related to the journalist's work; for instance, that they should be ashamed</i>). |
| Implicational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sarcasm - Mimicry - Insinuation/snide remarks |

The analytical procedure used to address the second research question in Paper II involved conducting a thematic discourse analysis, following Taylor and Ussher’s (2001) guidelines. This process adhered to Nowell et al.'s (2017) methodologically rigorous step-by-step procedure, drawing upon the methodologies of renowned qualitative researchers like King (2004) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Built upon Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of trustworthiness, this approach incorporates criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, aligning with conventional quantitative assessments of validity and reliability. Nowell et al.'s (2017) systematic approach to thematic analysis is widely recognized and applied in various studies (e.g., Awan and Zempi, 2020; Xue et al., 2020; Meggs and Ahmed, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). This six-phase method was applied to the data analysis, characterized not as a strictly linear process but as an iterative and reflective one, involving continuous movement between phases. The following is a description of the operationalization of this step-by-step data analysis process in this study.

Table 5: Code Scheme

| <i>Initial Codes</i> | <i>Final Thematic Codes</i> | <i>Subtheme</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| <i>Intellectual Derogation</i> | 1. Character Debunking and Identity Assault | 1.1 Personal attacks |
| <i>Personal Derision</i> | 1. Character Debunking and Identity Assault | 1.1 Personal attacks |
| <i>Sexist Remarks</i> | 1. Character Debunking and Identity Assault | 1.2 Sexism and racism |
| <i>Racist Remarks</i> | 1. Character Debunking and Identity Assault | 1.2 Sexism and racism |
| <i>Direct Threats</i> | 1. Character Debunking and Identity Assault | 1.3 Threats |
| <i>Political Bias Accusations</i> | 2. Systemic Critiques of Journalistic Practice | |
| <i>Hypocrisy Accusations</i> | 2. Systemic Critiques of Journalistic Practice | |
| <i>Judgment Criticism</i> | 3. Questioning Professionalism and Integrity | |
| <i>Competency Critique</i> | 3. Questioning Professionalism and Integrity | |
| <i>Shaming Tactics</i> | 4. Moral Enforcements and Public Humiliation | |

The initial phase, which coincided with the analysis of the first research question, involved storing and reviewing the collected data, followed by a thorough examination and discussion between Linnea Gustafsson and myself.

During this phase, an initial coding scheme was developed, comprising ten categories directly derived from the dataset (as shown in Table 5). The subsequent phase entailed analyzing the coded data extracts for each subtheme to identify consistent patterns. By the fourth phase, this coding scheme was refined into four overarching themes: (1) Character Debunking and Identity Assault, (2) Systemic Critiques of Journalistic Practice, (3) Questioning Professionalism and Integrity, and (4) Moral Enforcements and Public Humiliation.

The thematic structure was guided by the objective of exploring the roles of impoliteness and morality as informal social control mechanisms. This exploration was based on the conceptual framework presented in Paper II, which centers on the sociopragmatic interplay between morality, the establishment of moral order, impoliteness, and ideology. During the fifth phase of the analysis, each of the four themes underwent a thorough examination. This involved closely examining and elaborating upon key data segments that aligned with the overarching narrative of the dataset and the central research question. The final, sixth phase was dedicated to crafting the study's analytical narrative, effectively synthesizing and presenting the conclusions drawn from the established themes.

Interview Study

A total of fourteen interviews were conducted with managers from media and journalistic organizations across Sweden. This group included executives, editors-in-chief, and publishers who are actively engaged in news production, programming, and editorial decision-making across various sectors: radio, television, weekly or monthly periodicals, trade press, local news, digital media, and print. The range of their responsibilities varied widely: some managed large media corporations with multiple outlets, while others oversaw newsrooms in smaller towns. Regardless of the scale, all were responsible for their staff under the Work Environment Act.

The study collaborated with Utgivarna, a prominent Swedish publishing association, to identify participants. Through this partnership, 21 potential participants were identified based on their roles as journalistic employers, aiming to ensure diverse representation across sectors, newsroom sizes, and geographical locations. Potential respondents were contacted via email, which detailed the research aims of the entire PhD project and, specifically, Paper III.

The email included participation criteria and an invitation to join the study. Participants were also assured that the data from the interviews would be treated with the highest degree of anonymity possible.

Out of the 21 potential participants, seven declined to participate; some cited time constraints, while others did not respond to the initial invitation or follow-up reminders. Although a third of those initially approached chose not to participate, no evident recruitment bias was present. Notably, neither the reasons given by the seven who declined, nor their professional roles and responsibilities, showed a consistent pattern indicative of bias. The interviews, conducted between April and July 2022, typically lasted about an hour each. Gender representation among the respondents was balanced, with seven males and seven females. The venues for these sessions were evenly split: seven were conducted in person at the respondents' workplaces, and seven were conducted via Zoom. All interviews were diligently transcribed by a professional service.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, guided by six overarching themes that also served as the interview guide:

1. Is the democratic role of media under threat?
2. Does the legal system effectively protect the media's democratic role?
3. How is responsibility for a safe and healthy work environment maintained amidst online harassment?
4. How is online harassment discussed in newsrooms?
5. In what ways is self-censorship problematic?
6. What solutions are needed to address these issues?

The interview guide was emailed to respondents in advance to familiarize them with the primary discussion topics. This approach was intended to facilitate dynamic dialogue around each theme/question. It is important to note that the analysis in Paper III mainly draws from questions 3–5, as discussions related to the other questions were beyond the article's scope. Before their interviews, study participants were also informed about the specific definition of online harassment used in this research. This definition aligns with Miller's (2023) characterization of harassment as "unwanted abusive behaviors", as mentioned in the introduction chapter. This encompasses a broad spectrum of abuse, ranging from mild to severe. Therefore, it was clarified to participants that online harassment, in the context of this study, includes both unlawful forms of abuse and subtler forms of insulting language.

Step-by-step operationalization

Thematic analysis of the interview data followed the same six-step procedure proposed by Nowell et al. (2017), paralleling the thematic analysis of the Twitter data. Similar to the Twitter analysis, the application of this framework was not strictly linear but characterized by an iterative and reflective process, involving continuous movement between phases. Below is a detailed breakdown of the step-by-step data analysis process in Paper III.

Following Nowell et al.'s (2017) six-step process of thematic analysis, the initial stage involved handling the interview transcripts. These transcripts, along with their corresponding audio files, were archived. For a comprehensive understanding of the data, the author and two other researchers affiliated with the project rigorously reviewed these transcripts. During this phase, the author developed an extensive coding scheme that included primary themes and subthemes derived from the entirety of the interview content (refer to Table 6). These preliminary themes were then discussed among the author and the two researchers. Of note, this scheme included aspects later excluded from analysis in Paper III, as they fell outside the specific focus of the article.

In the third phase, the coded data extracts for each subtheme were evaluated to identify consistent patterns. During the fourth phase, the coding scheme was synthesized into four overarching themes: (1) Prioritizing Physical Safeguarding, (2) Varied Perceptions of Psychosocial Health, (3) Journalistic Stoicism, and (4) Organizational Disconnect from Online Harassment. These themes were developed to provide a coherent narrative related to the research question of Paper III, anchored in the analytical framework of institutional theory. This thematic structure aimed to illuminate how institutional practices within news organizations influence their perceptions of and responses to online harassment targeting their journalists. At this stage, the analysis was reviewed and discussed with the two researchers involved in the overarching research project. A comparison with the initial coding scheme (as shown in Table 1) led to the exclusion of aspects, particularly related to the main themes 'The Swedish Public Sphere' and 'The Legal System,' from the thematic analysis within the scope of Paper III.

In the fifth phase, a detailed analysis of each of the four themes was conducted, which involved pinpointing relevant quotations that aligned seamlessly with the broader narrative of the dataset and the research question (Paper III). Following the solidification of the final themes, the study's analysis was drafted in the sixth phase.

Table 6: Initial Code Scheme

| <i>Main Theme</i> | <i>Subtheme Code</i> | <i>Subtheme Description</i> |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| <i>The Swedish Public Sphere</i> | 1a | The confidence crisis in journalism |
| | 1b | The impact of social media on journalism |
| | 1c | Local politics' influence on media reporting |
| | 1d | Challenges of the pressured public sphere |
| | 1e | Recruiting under threat |
| <i>Two Categories of Pressures</i> | 2a | Shifting journalistic narratives through discrediting and subtle harassment |
| | 2b | Aggressive and organized pressures |
| <i>Work Environment</i> | 3a | Measures and guidelines against online harassment |
| | 3b | Focus on severe threats and physical confrontations |
| | 3c | Lack of response to lesser aggressions |
| | 3d | Culture of acceptance |
| | 3e | Individual's responsibility for support |
| <i>Self-censorship</i> | 4a | Silence around self-censorship |
| | 4b | The internal struggle of self-censorship |
| | 4c | Lacking knowledge |
| <i>The Legal System</i> | 5a | Improved handling of journalists' vulnerabilities |
| | 5b | Discrepancy in competence throughout the judicial chain |
| | 5c | The importance of active support and knowledge |
| | 5d | Legal and economic challenges |

Ethical Considerations

All three research methods utilized in this thesis received approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority through two separate applications: one for the survey and interview studies and another for the collection of Twitter data. The initial plan included conducting two sets of interviews—one with journalists experienced in online harassment and another with key informants. Both were included in the ethical application, but only the interviews with journalists were anticipated to potentially provoke sensitive reactions. While

the focus ultimately shifted to interviews with media managers, as detailed in Paper III, two interviews with journalists were conducted before this decision was made. Although these interviews were not included in any of the papers, they provided insights that influenced the final interview study and can therefore be considered a helpful part of the preparation work. Additionally, the interview excerpt presented on the first page of this thesis is also derived from one of these interviews.

Although none of the methods employed in this thesis posed any direct risk to the participants, managing the collected data did present specific challenges. One notable concern was securing the Swedish Journalist Union's member list. Ensuring the confidentiality and security of this list was crucial, as it could pose a risk to members if it fell into the wrong hands. Adequate measures were, therefore, taken to protect this sensitive information and maintain the privacy and safety of the individuals on the list. An extensive amount of data was likewise collected through the machine learning system as part of the PhD project, focusing on open-source data accessible to anyone with internet access. Although there was interest in the content of the messages and comments, the focus was primarily on the patterns within which they arose. The raw data for this portion of the study managed in collaboration with Språkbanken at Gothenburg University, was stored securely on their servers.

Participants in both the survey and interview studies were provided with detailed information in advance, which included the voluntary nature of their participation and the procedures for handling their data. In the interview study, respondents gave informed consent prior to participating. As for the survey, respondents gave their consent by choosing to respond to the survey, as outlined in the information provided about the study. Across all four articles, measures were taken to ensure data anonymization. Regardless of the data source—interviews, surveys, or Twitter analysis—the identity of participants and subjects was carefully protected. This approach not only complied with ethical guidelines but also safeguarded the privacy of the individuals involved, ensuring the integrity of the research process.

Strengths, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Research

The employment of the triangulation method in this thesis is noteworthy. This strategic utilization of multiple triangulations, which merges methodological

and theoretical perspectives, not only bolsters the robustness and credibility of the findings but also aligns closely with the central aim of this thesis. This approach allows for a rich and multi-faceted exploration beyond what a single method or theory could achieve independently.

With that being said, there are also some limitations to the research. One such limitation relates to the representativeness of the survey respondents in respect to the broader population of journalists in Sweden. While the sample size of approximately 3000 respondents can be argued to constitute a significant proportion of journalists in the country, the question remains as to how representative this group truly is. Therefore, while the sample provides valuable insights into the experiences of a substantial subset of Swedish journalists, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings to the entire journalistic community. This limitation highlights the potential diversity and variability that a survey conducted with union members alone may not fully capture.

A further limitation of this thesis is the treatment of journalists as a homogeneous group, a decision made to capture overarching patterns in online harassment targeting the profession. While this approach provides a broad understanding of the challenges faced by journalists, it inevitably overlooks the nuanced experiences of specific subsets within this group. For instance, a more focused study on specific kinds of journalists, such as investigative reporters or political correspondents, could reveal unique aspects of online harassment related to their specific fields of work. Additionally, specifically examining the conditions of freelance journalists who do not have the same attachment to specific news organizations would be beneficial. This could shed light on the distinct challenges and experiences of this group of journalists.

Similarly, exploring the experiences of female journalists or journalists with foreign backgrounds, who, according to international studies (e.g., Chen et al. 2020; Koirala 2020; Miller and Lewis 2020; Kundu and Bhuiyan 2021; Sagun, and Alvarez 2021; Kempton and Connolly-Ahern 2022; Al-Rawi 2023; Tandoc, Siddiqua, Gong, and Aksar 2023; Zviyita and Mare 2023), often face higher levels of online harassment, could provide valuable insights. Such a focus would likely uncover distinct patterns of harassment and the specific impacts on these groups. Acknowledging and examining these varied experiences would contribute to a more detailed and inclusive understanding of the phenomenon. Considering the position of marginalized individuals could also provide deeper perspectives, revealing how systemic inequalities influence their experiences and responses.

However, the survey data in this thesis did not detect that female journalists self-censored to a considerable degree more than male journalists, nor that their health was affected more negatively. Interestingly, these levels were slightly higher among journalists with a foreign background. The interview study also found that news organizations had a problem recruiting young female journalists (refer to subtheme 1e in Table 6), indicating an area for future research to explore. This could involve investigating the factors that deter young women from entering journalism and how these challenges could be addressed. Future research might benefit from examining these subgroups in greater detail, adding depth to our understanding of how online harassment affects journalists differently based on their gender, ethnicity, journalistic specialization, and other factors.

Furthermore, while Twitter offers an ideal environment for analyzing impoliteness, largely due to its widespread use for exchanging news, opinions, and sentiments, it is essential to consider its limitations within the broader context of online harassment. It is crucial to acknowledge that the strategies and forms of harassment encountered on Twitter may not be entirely representative of other social media platforms or other forms of digital communication, such as email or text messages. Different social media environments have unique user dynamics, communication norms, and audience engagement, which can influence how harassment is manifested and experienced. For instance, the format and audience of platforms like Instagram or Facebook might foster different types of interactions compared to Twitter. Therefore, while the insights gleaned from Twitter data are meaningful, they should be interpreted with the understanding that they represent just one piece of the puzzle.

At the same time, based on previous research outlined in Paper II, it is reasonable to assume that the patterns of anti-press rhetoric that were revealed are not exclusive to Twitter but represent a broader discourse of delegitimizing media criticism. In this context, conducting a network analysis to understand how online harassment and the ideas represented in it are spread would be of great interest. Such an analysis could provide deeper insights into the dissemination patterns and influence networks behind online harassment. This was one of the initial intentions behind the machine learning development within the project. However, due to various constraints, this aspect could not be fully explored within the current scope of the thesis.

In this thesis, deliberate delimitations were made, particularly in defining who qualifies as a journalist, a challenge that was especially pronounced in developing the list of journalists on Twitter. The decision was made to exclude

certain accounts to focus on those affiliated with mainstream media organizations. The exclusion criteria encompassed accounts where the user is more associated with another profession, such as politicians; journalists with inactive or private Twitter profiles, indicated by very few or no followers, minimal or no tweets/mentions, or profiles whose last activity dates far back; and individuals who have not been active as journalists in recent years. Conversely, journalists representing so-called ‘alternative’ media, or independent political bloggers, were also excluded. A similar approach was adopted in the interview study with media managers, which also exclusively featured representatives from news organizations which can be classified as mainstream or traditional.

Summary of Papers

Paper I

Swedish journalists' perceptions of legal protection against unlawful online harassment

Author: Oscar Björkenfeldt

This paper explores how Swedish journalists perceive the legal system's ability to safeguard them against unlawful online harassment. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study categorizes these perceptions based on the journalists' trust in the legal system. Here, 'trust in the legal system' is conceptually tied to procedural justice, focusing on the individual's perspective of fairness and legitimacy within legal systems, as discussed by Tyler (2003; Tyler and Blader, 2013). However, this concept serves not as a theoretical framework, but rather as a wider perspective for understanding trust.

The analysis utilizes survey data that includes a multiple-choice question and more than 1,000 open-ended responses. These responses are methodically sorted based on the respondents' confidence in the legal system's ability to protect their interests in online harassment scenarios. This categorization approach offers insight into the varying degrees of trust among respondents and their views on the legal system's effectiveness in addressing online harassment.

The quantitative results reveal widespread skepticism about the judicial system's ability to shield journalists from online harassment. Specifically, 51% of respondents rated the legal system's protective capabilities as either 'fairly poor' (38.2%) or 'very poor' (12.9%). Meanwhile, 28.8% viewed the system's abilities as 'neither good nor bad', 18.4% saw them as 'fairly good,' and a mere 1.7% considered them 'very good.' Essentially, these findings indicate that a significant number of journalists have low trust in the legal system. Although this is a noteworthy conclusion, the qualitative data provide more detailed insights. These qualitative findings are categorized into three groups based on the journalists' trust in the legal system's protective measures: (1) high trust,

(2) moderate trust (neither high nor low), and (3) low trust. The details of these categories will be summarized below.

Journalists with high trust in the legal system generally believe in its improved ability to handle harassment cases effectively, a belief influenced by positive personal experiences and awareness of successful legal interventions. They emphasize the importance of being treated with respect and dignity by legal authorities, often valuing serious and helpful treatment more than the actual outcome of a case. Despite their optimism, these respondents expressed concerns about issues outside the legal scope, such as dealing with anonymous threats or aggressive messages that may not clearly constitute unlawful behavior. They also noted that harassment affects individuals differently, and the legal system sometimes lacks a comprehensive understanding of the harm caused by crimes with low penalties. Additionally, it was supposed that some journalists might be reluctant to pursue legal action against harassment, influenced by a professional culture that normalizes enduring animosity and intimidation as part of their job.

Respondents in the second category, while sharing some perceptions, were generally more critical of the legal system. They found addressing harassment challenging due to its ambiguous expression, which complicates the determination of its legality. Advocating for improvements, these respondents called for clearer definitions of illegal online harassment and better handling of less severe cases. They observed that the legal system typically intervenes only in cases of explicit, severe threats, leading to a belief that it fails to recognize the full impact of online harassment on journalists' ability to work effectively. Additionally, this group highlighted the role of employers in fostering a secure workplace, emphasizing the need for support both before and during legal proceedings. However, they critiqued employers' efforts as inadequate and unsystematic, noting that harassment has become so normalized within journalism that it's often viewed as part of the job. This normalization is further reinforced by attitudes within the legal system that suggest journalists should handle harassment independently, perpetuating this trend.

Among respondents with low trust in the legal system, the most pervasive perception was that online crimes against journalists are not given high enough priority. This lack of trust often stemmed from negative experiences, such as the futility of filing police reports where charges are frequently dismissed. This has led many journalists to refrain from seeking police assistance, feeling that their concerns are trivialized and not treated fairly by the legal system. Additionally, there was a widespread belief among this group that the legal

system lacks the necessary expertise and resources to successfully address digital transgressions. This belief is compounded by the perceived low priority given to these cases, especially in contrast to physical offenses, leading to a reluctance to press charges for fear of appearing intimidated or giving the harasser a perceived 'victory.' Furthermore, respondents with low trust described a challenging environment due to the lack of clear support from the legal system and journalistic cultural norms that downplay the severity of harassment. This situation keeps journalists from expressing vulnerability and adapting their work practices to cope with the hostile climate, suggesting that both individual journalists and broader society are adversely affected by inadequate legal protection and the prevailing attitudes towards online harassment.

To summarize, this paper reveals that journalists often perceive the legal system as trivializing the severity of their online harassment experiences. One key finding is the impact of respectful treatment by legal authorities, which tends to be more influential than the outcomes of criminal complaints. Such treatment shapes attitudes and norms about legal protection, showing how supportive legal approaches can empower journalists to counter online harassment. The research also uncovers a stigmatizing culture within journalism, which contributes to normalizing abuse and affecting responses to harassment. This creates a cyclical relationship where the normalization of abuse both influences and is influenced by the legal system's efforts to address these issues. Many journalists believe the legal system focuses mainly on extreme or potentially violent harassment, leaving less severe cases with limited recourse and fostering a sense of helplessness. This belief reinforces the idea that harassment is an inevitable aspect of the journalistic experience. Additionally, the paper highlights the lack of clear support mechanisms for journalists, pointing out the discrepancy between established laws and norms and attitudes within the journalistic field. This disconnect indicates that laws, attitudes, and norms are not effectively synchronized to support journalists in the digital era.

In conclusion, this study provides fresh insights into how Swedish journalists perceive the legal framework concerning online harassment. It underscores the need for a more proactive approach from the legal system to recognize and address online harassment as a significant threat to journalists' freedoms. Moreover, the study acknowledges that online harassment extends beyond the realm of criminal law, also constituting a workplace issue. Therefore, a holistic approach is advocated, addressing not only the legal aspects of harassment but also its psychological and social impacts. This perspective challenges the

normalization of harassment within the field of journalism and among legal actors. For example, employers are encouraged to view even subtle forms of harassment as psychosocial workplace issues, rather than merely as security concerns.

Paper II

Impoliteness and morality as instruments of destructive informal social control in online harassment targeting Swedish journalists

Authors: Oscar Björkenfeldt and Linnea Gustafsson

Although there is growing research on online harassment targeting journalists, this paper highlights a gap in understanding how sociopolitical contexts and the pragmatic functions of language shape the nature and impact of this harassment. Addressing this research gap, the paper explores patterns and strategies of harassment targeting Swedish journalists on Twitter by analyzing 555 impolite tweets that were directed at them. Informed by the interplay of sociopragmatic frameworks of morality (Kádár et al., 2019; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár, 2021; Bou-Franch, 2022), language aggression (impoliteness) (Culpeper, 2005, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2017; Wodak et al., 2021), and ideology (Van Dijk, 2006), the paper's primary objective is to analyze the articulation of interconnectedness between morality, moral order, (coercive) impoliteness, and the manifestation of online harassment targeting journalists on Twitter. To do this, two research questions were posed:

RQ1: What are the predominant types of impoliteness used against Swedish journalists on Twitter, and in what manner do they act as instruments of harm and restraint?

RQ2: How do impoliteness and morality interplay as discursive mechanisms for exerting destructive informal social control over Swedish journalists on Twitter?

By addressing these research questions, we align our study with existing scholarship that underscores online harassment as a calculated tactic to silence journalists and suppress dissent. Building on this body of knowledge and drawing from a sociopragmatic perspective informed by socio-legal research on societal regulation mechanisms, we posit that online harassment directed at

journalists epitomizes a pernicious form of social control, which we label 'Destructive Informal Social Control' (DISC). We define DISC as:

The use of derogatory language, insults, offensive or implicit questioning, shame, and general disapproval as a means of exerting adverse influence over democratic institutions, professions, and actors. This type of action aims to maintain discursive power without relying on formal authority and typically operates within the bounds of legal regulations.

Thus, unique to this paper is the intersection of socio-legal and sociopragmatic realms, probing how social control manifests via lawful language. While prior linguistic studies have focused on legal settings, like courtrooms or legal texts (Lakoff, 1989; Stratman, 2004; Harris, 2011; Larsson, 2011; Mooney, 2012; Hutton, 2022), we broaden the scope to address legally relevant facets arising outside formalized legal spaces.

The analytical procedure in this paper is connected to the two research questions. The first research question focuses on categorizing various types of impoliteness, based on Culpeper's (2011) model. To address the second research question, the study employed a thematic discourse analysis. Regarding the findings related to the first research question, the paper highlighted that insults were the most common form of impoliteness observed in the dataset. This finding underscores the conventional and insulting nature of impoliteness, aligning with Culpeper's (2011) concept of coercive impoliteness. This type of impoliteness is deliberately used to realign values, with the instigator aiming to benefit or reinforce their values and beliefs through impolite language. In other words, it encompasses the notion of social harm, which involves "causing damage to the social identity of target persons and a lowering of their power or status", and "may be imposed by insults, reproaches, sarcasm, and various types of impolite behavior" (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994, p. 171). Surprisingly, direct threats made up only 0.9% of the dataset.

While the data aligned with the first research question provided valuable insights into the nature and strategic use of online harassment, they only offered limited information about the underlying dynamics of these attempts. Therefore, the thematic analysis was designed to address these shortcomings and variations within the data. The thematic analysis identified four key themes: (1) Character Debunking and Identity Assault, (2) Systemic Critiques of Journalistic Practice, (3) Questioning Professionalism and Integrity, and (4) Moral Enforcement and Public Humiliation. A summary of each theme follows.

The thematic analysis provides additional support for the inclusion of impoliteness directed at journalists within the moral framework of anti-press rhetoric. This moral framework is clearly rooted in normative beliefs and ideologies, where journalists perceived as transgressing these moral standards become targets of conflict and morally condemned acts of aggression (Kádár et al., 2019). In line with the identified themes, assailants employ specific discursive strategies to influence journalists negatively. The primary tactics include attacking journalists' personal attributes, notably their intelligence. Moreover, journalists face criticism for perceived political biases, hypocrisy, and being out of touch with reality. There's also a trend of dehumanizing insults, wherein journalists are depicted in terms of disgust, further stripping them of their individuality and humanity (Shin et al., 2021). These strategic critiques aim not only to question journalists' professional judgment and credibility but also to induce shame about their work. The dataset also contained instances of xenophobic and sexist attacks, with female journalists and those with foreign backgrounds especially targeted. However, it is important to note that the general sentiment is sexist and racist, entwined with broader populist and anti-press rhetoric more.

Based on the findings related to the two research questions, this paper demonstrates that impoliteness (or online harassment) does not carry any hidden connotations. Instead, impoliteness functions as a deliberate tool, influenced by discursive and ideological rhetoric rooted in moral values, to exert destructive pressure on journalism. These findings are supported by existing research, affirming the deeply entrenched nature of online harassment directed toward journalists within a multifaceted framework of anti-press rhetoric. The deliberate utilization of impoliteness in the analyzed dataset underscores concerted efforts to exert influence on journalism through language, all while seemingly remaining within the boundaries of freedom of speech.

When placed in the context of broader societal dynamics, these findings underscore the precarious balance of rights evident in the language analyzed in this study. They unveil an intrinsic challenge: while constitutional provisions are designed to safeguard freedom of speech, they are paradoxically being exploited to suppress the same freedom for journalists. Our analysis suggests that this manifestation of Destructive Informal Social Control (DISC) leverages impolite language, safeguarded by legal freedom of speech, as its primary weapon. Instead of depending on explicit authority, it subtly wields influence over the news media with derogatory language, insults, and insinuations—all with the intent of retaining discursive power. In this regard,

the paper uncovers discursive strategies aiming to foster an atmosphere steeped in fear, uncertainty, and hesitation for journalists. The coordinated nature of these campaigns, undergirded by collective values and norms, not only showcases resilience surpassing isolated attacks but also signals a broader and troubling trend: the escalating normalization of skepticism and distrust directed at journalists. Although the paper is situated in a Swedish context, it also recognizes that the weaponization of freedom of speech to control and discredit traditional media is not confined by borders.

Based on the findings presented in this paper, we strongly advocate for future investigations to explore the dynamics of language, morality, aggression, and attempts to impose destructive informal control on journalists and other professional groups with crucial democratic responsibilities. Additionally, we hope this study will serve as a springboard for bridging the gap between sociopragmatic and socio-legal research. Sociopragmatic perspectives can enhance our understanding of the relationship between formal law and informal systems of social control. Such an approach is highly relevant in contemporary digital societies where technological means are essential for public expression and opinion formation.

Paper III

Addressing Online Harassment in Swedish Journalism: An Institutional Perspective on Management

Author: Oscar Björkenfeldt

This paper asserts that while online harassment against journalists constitutes a problem in relation to journalists' work, it still lacks adequate attention in working-life research. Existing journalism studies reveal that journalists often view news organizations as poorly equipped to understand and modify work practices to mitigate the psychological impacts of rising rates of online harassment. However, this area of research remains limited and superficial in theoretical development. Furthermore, the focus has been predominantly on journalists' perspectives, largely overlooking the views of employers and news organizations in managing online harassment.

Accordingly, the paper acknowledges a gap in our understanding of how managers and employers view online harassment targeting their journalistic

staff, especially from a work environment perspective. Exploring this under-investigated domain promises to introduce insights into the established narratives of workplace violence and cyberbullying in working life research, providing pivotal insights into the evolving working conditions of journalists in the digital age. Building on this identified research void, the paper aims to examine the extent to which Swedish news organizations fulfill their obligation to ensure a conducive work environment, particularly in addressing the psychosocial challenges arising from journalists' encounters with online harassment. To achieve this aim, interviews were conducted with 14 prominent figures, including executives, editors-in-chief, and publishers from both local and national news entities in Sweden. The study focuses on the central research question:

- In pursuit of a healthy psychosocial work environment, how do Swedish media managers understand and respond to work-related challenges stemming from online harassment targeting their journalists?

Navigating through this question enables the paper to achieve two key objectives: first, to illuminate employers' perceptions of online harassment; and second, to elucidate the strategies news organizations use to create a supportive work environment amidst these challenges. Additionally, by applying institutional theory (Scott, 2008) as an analytical lens, the study gains theoretical depth, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the entrenched structures, norms, and practices within these organizations. This approach provides a framework for comprehending how news organizations are influenced by their broader environment in addressing the challenges posed by online harassment. These insights hold relevance not only in the Nordic context but also resonate within the broader international community.

Through thematic analysis of the interview data, four main themes were identified: (1) Prioritizing Physical Safeguarding, (2) Varied Perceptions of Psychosocial Health, (3) Journalistic Stoicism, and (4) Organizational Disconnect from Online Harassment. In addition to these themes, the paper includes a brief section, based on the interview study, about the preventive measures adopted in newsrooms against online harassment. This section illustrates how news organizations have implemented specific practices and guidelines to combat online harassment, following guidance from entities like the Swedish Union of Journalism. These guidelines are in line with ALM and AFS regulations and cover interventions, analyses, measures, and follow-ups. The respondents indicated that support from occupational health services or crisis specialists is available, but these services are rarely utilized in relation to online harassment. Instead, there is a notable focus on measures such as the

implementation of security personnel, alarm systems, and online safety protocols within organizations. A growing trend is the increasing reliance on external security firms or in-house security departments for threat assessment and response.

Regarding the main results from the thematic analysis, the respondents believed that they had effectively strategized against online harassment, predominantly by focusing on physical safety measures. However, the subtler psychological impacts of online harassment were largely overlooked or, in many cases, were not even recognized. For instance, despite the interviews' emphasis on online harassment, respondents frequently discussed safety measures related to more explicit physical threats, such as protests or the conflict in Ukraine, showing a notable preference for preemptive risk assessments. Additionally, the responsibility for addressing these concerns was often delegated to in-house security departments or to external security firms. These entities typically engage in legal-oriented security assessments, aiming to instill a sense of security, especially in instances of overt harassment.

In line with the general tendency to overlook subtler forms of online harassment, respondents expressed difficulty addressing these instances due to the subjective nature of journalists' reactions to such exposure. Utilizing institutional theory, the paper uncovers an insight not previously addressed in research: both managers and journalists operate within a shared institutional framework. This shared framework blurs the distinction between management and journalists, suggesting that their common institutional base may lead managers to align with deeply ingrained journalistic ideals, values, beliefs, and practices. Consequently, subtler forms of abusive behavior, like the vast majority of online harassment, often do not fit these long-standing paradigms. Essentially, this institutional logic hinders media managers from adopting a reflexive approach to the psychosocial consequences of online harassment. This results in either a lack of awareness or in passivity, even though they recognize the 'grinding effect' and 'mentally taxing' nature of online harassment on their employees.

Regarding the latter, the paper demonstrated that the approach of news organizations toward the work environment is shaped by a normative belief ingrained in journalistic culture, which tacitly normalizes enduring online harassment as 'part of the job'. Consequently, a distinct tension emerges between longstanding cultural norms and contemporary efforts to champion occupational well-being in today's digital landscape. An underlying assumption persists suggesting that online harassment only poses problems for 'extra sensitive individuals,' given its depiction as 'such an obvious part of our

everyday life.' Adhering to this belief, media managers assert that online harassment does not impact core journalistic practices at the organizational level. In essence, online harassment is not perceived as a barrier threatening the broader journalistic environment. As a result, respondents did not emphasize the organizational importance of ensuring journalists' psychosocial well-being; rather, they tended to downplay it as a personal issue.

The paper reveals that an overt focus on physical safety in journalism, rooted in historical normative pressures that prioritized journalists' physical well-being in hazardous zones, inadvertently overlooks milder forms of harassment. This results in a divergence between regulative mandates and journalistic normative practices, leading to a skewed prioritization that marginalizes certain aspects of employee welfare. The research suggests that media managers, deeply embedded in journalistic culture, play a crucial role as supportive employers. However, they are often entangled with entrenched ideals and practices that hinder effectively addressing harassment issues. A transformative shift in this domain requires managers to critically evaluate and reflect on institutionalized beliefs and practices; a formidable challenge given the demanding dynamics of contemporary newsroom operations. This study underscores the growing misalignment within institutional pillars, highlighting the necessity for strategies that go beyond individual protective measures. These strategies should engage with these deep-seated structures for more effective and sustainable solutions, aligning with the realities of workplace challenges in modern journalism.

Paper IV

Reshaping the Narrative: Confronting Online Harassment and Self-Censorship in Journalism

Author: Oscar Björkenfeldt

This paper aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to resilience against self-censorship induced by online harassment, as well as the factors that exacerbate it, leading to withdrawal and reluctance among journalists. This is achieved by systematically investigating the factors that drive or mitigate self-censorship through survey responses from approximately 3,000 Swedish journalists. The research design is specifically formulated to examine how social influences impact journalists' self-censorship behaviors and to explore self-censorship as a direct result of fear and emotional health.

This approach is inspired by Jonathan Penney's Social Conformity theory of Chilling Effects—which posits that chilling effects are best understood as acts of compliance with, or conformity to, social norms, especially in contexts marked by ambiguity—and the fight-or-flight response (Cannon, 1915), a fundamental concept in stress research (McCarty, 2016), to understand reactions to perceived threats. However, the main framework of the study is grounded in the fight-or-flight response, while Penney's theory is utilized to gain a deeper understanding of self-censorship behaviors in the context of social conformity.

Informed by this approach, this study poses the following research questions:

- a) What factors contribute to journalists resisting self-censorship in response to online harassment?
- b) What factors lead journalists to engage in self-censorship due to online harassment?

Ultimately, this research contributes to the development of strategies and policies that support journalists in maintaining their professional integrity and their essential role in upholding democratic values. Furthermore, it enhances the understanding of the interplay between online harassment, fear, emotional health, social influences, and journalistic practices. This insight will not only inform future efforts to safeguard the press from the detrimental effects of mob-censorship but also enrich academic discourse on media freedom, self-censorship, and the psychological impacts of online harassment on journalists.

The dual perspective of self-censorship—encompassing both an instinctual psychological disposition and behavior influenced by social conformity—forms the basis of this paper's empirical inquiry. Specifically, it examines the relationship between self-censorship and fear, operationalized through its impact on mental health, alongside factors related to social conformity. While the connection to fear is direct, the aspect of social conformity is assessed by testing the influence of social norms and uncertainty, drawing on Penney's (2022) theory. Additionally, the study enhances Penney's framework by incorporating the concept of attitudes (Ajzen, 1991), thereby enriching the analysis of self-censorship dynamics with a vital element from social psychological research on human behavior. Accordingly, self-censorship serves as the dependent variable, while fear, attitudes, social norms, and uncertainty serve as independent variables. The analysis employs a combination of descriptive and regression analysis techniques.

First and foremost, the results demonstrates that a significant proportion of journalists—37.3% in refraining from reporting and 48.1% in adapting their reporting—practice self-censorship to avoid online harassment. Moreover, the analysis present insightful findings that advance the literature on self-censorship among journalists, particularly in the context of increasing attempts to undermine the profession's autonomy through online harassment. More concretely, the findings underscore the complex nature of self-censorship among journalists, revealing that individual factors, rather than social influences, predominantly influence self-censorship behaviors. The significant link between adverse health impacts from online harassment and the tendency to self-censor highlights the critical role of personal well-being in journalistic practices. The stark contrast between the self-censorship behaviors of those who experience negative health effects and those who do not points to fear as a primary driver of self-censorship. This emphasizes the profound psychological and emotional impact of online harassment on journalists, influencing their professional behavior and decision-making. Similar results were found in relation to variables linked to attitudes and uncertainty, underscoring that internal factor such as personal health concerns, emotional reactions to negative feedback, and a lack of individual resilience are associated with higher degrees of self-censorship.

Furthermore, the study showed that social influences, in the form of perceived approval or disapproval from significant others (normative referents), when publishing under potential exposure to online harassment, neither mitigated nor amplified self-censorship behavior. This conclusion is based on the absence of a statistically significant relationship. This suggests that when journalists decide whether to self-censor, they do not weigh the opinions or potential reactions of significant others in their social or professional circles. Contrary to the expectation that social conformity would significantly influence self-censorship (Penney, 2022), journalists appear to be more guided by their internal assessments and personal experiences.

However, factors like feeling safeguarded by the legal system and receiving employer support demonstrate a positive, albeit weak, effect on journalists resisting self-censorship. This finding underscores the potential role of institutional support in empowering journalists to maintain their professional integrity when facing online harassment. Thus, the positive correlation highlights that legal safeguards can provide journalists with a sense of security, knowing that there are mechanisms in place to protect their rights and address instances of harassment. Similarly, employer support can reinforce journalists' confidence in their ability to report freely, as it signals organizational backing

and a commitment to their well-being. This institutional support can empower journalists to persist in reporting on contentious topics despite the risks, fostering greater resilience within the profession against external pressures.

In addition to the correlation observed with institutional support, more pronounced relationships were noted among journalists who displayed internal resilience towards adverse reactions to their journalism. This indicates a reduced propensity for self-censorship among those with the mental and emotional fortitude to handle online harassment. Furthermore, the study noted a somewhat stronger correlation among journalists who have become more acclimated to harassment, intriguingly associated with an increase in self-censorship. This counterintuitive finding suggests that prolonged exposure to online harassment may lead to heightened sensitivity and a more pronounced self-censorship response. Journalists who have repeatedly encountered harassment might develop a more cautious approach to avoid further negative experiences, which could explain the increased tendency to self-censor despite their familiarity with such threats. These findings highlight the complex nature of self-censorship and journalists' varied responses to online harassment. On one hand, building resilience appears to empower journalists, enabling them to maintain their professional integrity. On the other hand, continuous exposure to harassment may wear down journalists' defenses over time, leading to an increased likelihood of self-censorship. This underscores the subjective nature of self-censorship, presenting challenges for organizations attempting to address it uniformly, as individual journalists' personal experiences and coping mechanisms influence their responses to online harassment.

These results suggest new avenues for developing measures to strengthen resilience within the field of journalism. They also reveal the alarming impact of online harassment, particularly on journalists who lack the internal strength to withstand such adverse pressures. Consequently, while resilience training is crucial, proactive measures are equally necessary to reduce cultural stigmatization regarding online harassment. There must be a shift toward a more systematic approach to address this issue, ensuring that individuals affected by such incidents are not neglected or seen as merely enduring a routine aspect of journalism. Moreover, if the profession favors only those journalists who can independently resist online harassment, it may negatively impact diversity within the field.

Conclusions

The primary aim of this thesis is to enhance understanding of how the evolving digital landscape, particularly the rise of online harassment, influences journalism and its potential repercussions for fostering healthy public discourse. Within this broader quest, the thesis also seeks to advance the field of socio-legal studies by dissecting the interplay between digital transformation, shifting norms, and the intersection of formal and informal social controls. To fulfill these objectives, a convergent line has been drawn between four research papers exploring separate research questions. This final chapter presents and discusses the main conclusions of the thesis and accounts for how the research objectives have been achieved. In doing so, the thesis's main contributions are also acknowledged. Furthermore, the chapter delves into future directions and practical implications of the research, suggesting ways in which the insights gained can be applied to real-world scenarios and how they can inform future studies.

Main Conclusion

To better understand the main conclusions of this thesis, it is essential first to highlight the broader socio-legal lens through which the study is framed, with a particular focus on the concept of social disorientation as an overarching framework. In alignment with the research aims, this thesis explores how rapid digital transformation and evolving societal norms contribute to a state of social disorientation, challenging traditional structures, norms, and regulations. More precisely, this framework captures and underscores the normative challenges in community practices and regulation, emphasizing the struggle to keep pace with changes that threaten the autonomy of professional journalism. Thus, this thesis shows that such disorientation is intertwined with the emergence of new communication norms and the absence of effective (formal and informal) mechanisms for fostering healthy public discourse. In other words, it demonstrates that efforts to safeguard these values are, to a large

extent, misaligned with attempts to undermine the press through online harassment.

Transitioning from this conceptual background to a tangible illustration, the reader is directed back to the very first page of the thesis. Here, the interview excerpt resonates with the primary aim, offering a concrete representation of the theoretical foundations. It specifically highlights the ineffectiveness of legal systems and news organizations in addressing online harassment and demonstrates how journalists are left to deal with the psychological impact on their own. Accordingly, it reveals how technological and cultural shifts in the digital landscape challenge traditional social control systems, which struggle to adapt to the changing work environment and the democratic challenges associated with the scale of digital communication.

Building upon the foundational and more abstract contributions laid out thus far, the findings from the four included papers crystallize the research contributions more clearly. The thesis reveals how journalists often perceive the legal system as minimizing the severity of online harassment and its impact on their attitudes toward legal protection (Paper I). It underscores a gap in legal protection for journalists facing unlawful online harassment. Interestingly, the primary issue does not appear to stem from the formulation of laws but rather from a stigmatizing culture that downplays the severity of online harassment within both the journalism profession and the legal system. This situation creates a cycle in which harassment is normalized and inadequately addressed by legal systems, leading to a widespread sense of uncertainty and helplessness in the face of unlawful online abuse.

While this is problematic, the thesis also highlights that much of the online harassment journalists face falls outside the scope of criminal law. Consequently, criminal justice frameworks are ill-equipped to address this problem, as they are primarily designed to handle clear-cut offenses involving direct harm inflicted by one individual on another. Instead, the challenge involves protecting fundamental values from the destructive weaponization of free speech intended to silence the press. Simply put, the legal system struggles to address this issue because it transcends conventional notions of individual harm by targeting a public value.

To clarify this paradox, the situation can be compared to the broader environmental challenges of today. While many individuals adhere to environmental laws, we continue to struggle to protect the planet from climate disasters. Both scenarios underscore the inadequacy of existing legal frameworks in addressing complex, systemic issues that extend beyond

straightforward legal violations. Although these issues are not directly comparable, just as environmental protection requires a holistic approach beyond penalizing individual offenders, safeguarding journalistic freedom necessitates solutions that recognize and mitigate the adverse impact of online harassment on public discourse. Potential solutions to these challenges will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

The observation of the complexities inherent in categorizing online harassment as an unequivocal criminal offense laid the foundation for the inquiry into the language dynamics of online harassment explored in Paper II. This inquiry underscored the urgency of addressing these complexities. By leveraging sociopragmatic and socio-legal perspectives, the analysis in Paper II established that online harassment is closely tied to populist and anti-press rhetoric, which employs strategies grounded in moral and ideological foundations to undermine traditional journalism in Sweden. This finding is remarkable given Sweden's strong media welfare state, underscoring that press freedom in the modern digital age, even in traditionally robust democracies, cannot be taken for granted. It also signals a broader and troubling trend typically associated with countries like the United States following the tenure of former President Trump, marked by increasing attempts to normalize skepticism and distrust toward mainstream media. By introducing the concept of DISC, the thesis adds a socio-legal dimension to these sociocultural developments, emphasizing the normative aim of dissuading journalists by fostering an atmosphere of fear, hesitation, and uncertainty through coordinated attacks. Returning to the findings of Paper I, DISC illustrates the destructive nature of online harassment, highlighting that the primary issue is not the legality of the harassment itself but the attempt to shape and regulate journalists' behavior.

The results from Papers I and II progressively establish online harassment as a workplace issue, indicating that the prevention and management of this phenomenon predominantly falls within the scope of the Work Environment Act. Given this context, the findings from Paper III become particularly significant. Paper III provides an example of how institutionalization can hinder reflexive adaptation to the challenges posed by online harassment. In contrast to Papers I and II, which underscore the importance of proactive engagement by news organizations in handling online harassment, Paper III reveals that the strategies and mindsets of media managers are entrenched in a physical understanding of work environment hazards—an understanding seen through the lens of the potential legality of offenses against journalists. For instance, while the grinding psychological effects of online harassment were

acknowledged by several respondents, they did not recognize the psychosocial harms of online harassment as a legitimate organizational concern. Essentially, the normative structures and cultural beliefs within the industry suggest that if journalists cannot handle online harassment that is not explicitly physically threatening, they may be unsuited for the profession. This finding not only underscores the importance of working life research in delving deeper into the work environments of public professions like journalism in the digital age, but it also illustrates how a socio-legal understanding, informed by institutional theory, highlights the stronger influence of norms and culture over regulatory provisions.

Finally, Paper IV offers insights into the phenomenon of self-censorship among Swedish journalists. While some studies, including those conducted in Sweden (Löfgren-Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016; Scarmuzzino, 2020), have documented instances of self-censorship in journalism, no in-depth research has explored the factors that drive or mitigate this behavior in the context of online harassment. Beyond highlighting alarming levels of self-censorship, the thesis reveals how fear, stemming from the adverse health impacts of online harassment, influences journalists' decisions to self-censor. This underscores the psychological and emotional effects on their professional behavior and decision-making processes.

However, the relationship between online harassment and self-censorship due to health concerns contrasts with aspects of self-censorship related to social conformity. Although the paper identified patterns in variables linked to attitudes and control, these were predominantly associated with internal factors such as personal health concerns, emotional reactions to negative feedback, and individual resilience. This finding does not imply that social influences are unimportant; rather, it suggests a misalignment between support systems and social realities in journalists' professional environments. This distinction highlights the need for social support systems that better meet the needs of journalists with lower levels of resilience to mitigate the adverse effects of systematic attempts to undermine the press. It illustrates that if online harassment leads to fear or ill health, there is a significant likelihood of increased self-censorship. Moreover, these journalists are often left without legal support or assistance from their employers, and may face stigmatization for such feelings, as this contradicts social expectations of what makes for a successful journalist.

Contributions

To contextualize the main findings and conclusions in relation to the study's aims, this thesis enhances the understanding of how the evolving digital landscape, particularly the rise of online harassment, influences journalism and poses a real threat to free public debate. Specifically, the thesis establishes the adverse effects of online harassment on journalism in terms of health impacts and self-censorship. It frames this issue as a workplace problem, emphasizing that much of the online harassment journalists face falls outside the purview of criminal law. The thesis underscores that journalistic organizations have not sufficiently adapted to these challenges, failing to implement a systematic approach to address the resulting work environment issues. Moreover, it demonstrates the urgency of developing such work environment practices, given the coordinated, and ideologically- and morally driven attacks on professional journalism and the alarming levels of self-censorship due to online harassment. Simply put, the thesis shows that the phenomenon of undermining journalism in Sweden is not random and is unlikely to disappear soon. Without proactive measures, persistent harassment will continue undermining journalism, and the problem will grow like unchecked weeds that eventually overtake a garden.

Regarding its contribution to socio-legal research, the thesis underscores the field's relevance at the nexus of social problems arising from societal transformation. Employing a socio-legal lens, the thesis first observes a paradox in free speech: a threat to freedom of speech and press freedom, not arising from state censorship but from online harassment initiated by members of the public. By empirically addressing this paradox, the thesis contributes to socio-legal studies by illustrating the complexities and limitations of current legal mechanisms in safeguarding journalistic freedoms in the digital age. Aligning with robust socio-legal traditions, the thesis demonstrates that these limitations are not primarily issues of written law but are related to how regulations are interpreted through norms and cultural aspects. In other words, the social scientific lens used to approach this legal paradox allowed for the introduction of the concept of 'Destructive Informal Social Control' (DISC). This approach offers a perspective for examining how non-legal informal mechanisms adversely affect journalism and democratic institutions. DISC captures how informal social pressures, such as harassment expressed within the confines of free speech, control professional journalism beyond traditional legal frameworks. This concept extends socio-legal discourse by highlighting

covert forms of social control that fall within legal limits but have adverse implications for press freedom in the digital age.

Concerning the latter, the thesis also demonstrates that the phenomenon of online harassment, perpetrated by actors outside the workplace, represents a promising area of research within the field of working life research. In doing so, the thesis underscores the broader relevance of working life research, highlighting its potential to illuminate the democratic imperative of safeguarding journalists from online harassment. This exploration steers the field in a new direction, allowing for deeper examination of journalists and other public professions that have not been traditionally recognized within this context. Thus, through the conceptualization of social disorientation, the thesis acknowledges that digital transformation introduces new work-related challenges for professions subjected to similar forms of pressure, posing challenges not only to individual well-being but also to organizational dynamics and broader societal values.

The findings and conceptualization of social disorientation, particularly through DISC, serve as a call to action for policymakers and media organizations to recognize and address the subtler yet damaging forms of interference that undermine journalistic freedom. It is crucial to understand that while this thesis focuses on online harassment, such acts should be viewed as part of a broader phenomenon. Consequently, online harassment of journalists is an element of a larger trend that permeates public debate and threatens both the enlightened understanding and the public's ability to form an informed perspective on societal issues—two cornerstones of every liberal democracy. It risks the gradual formation of false beliefs and weakened trust in independent media and other social institutions that populist currents classify as 'enemies' or 'social elites'.

Future Direction

As the thesis reaches its conclusion, it reveals several opportunities for future research. While the thesis demonstrates systematic attempts to interfere with journalistic autonomy and the success of these attempts, the results merely scratch the surface of this issue. Although self-censorship and negative health impacts from online harassment are crucial findings, there are deeper, more nuanced consequences that require further investigation, such as the long-term

effects on journalistic integrity, the influence on public trust in the media, and the broader implications for democratic processes.

One such area to explore is how recruitment into the profession and the career trajectories of journalists are affected by online harassment. This raises questions about whether individuals who experience online harassment are more likely to leave the profession prematurely, switch to less public-facing roles, or reconsider becoming journalists due to potential exposure to such pressures. Interviews conducted for this thesis indirectly touched upon this issue, revealing a potential recruitment problem with young female journalists being hesitant to take positions involving coverage of potentially ‘controversial’ subjects. This observation aligns with an expanding body of research showing that female journalists are exposed to online harassment to a higher degree than their male colleagues. Although this is well-documented, less is known about how female journalists and those with a foreign background are affected before entering the profession and how these experiences influence their career decisions as journalists.

Another area that deserves further attention is public trust in the media. Although such trust is generally high in Sweden, the systematic nature of online harassment is concerning, as narratives like the ‘lying left-leaning press’ may spread beyond the narrow groups originally propagating these statements. Therefore, it is important to explore the role of online harassment in exacerbating public polarization and the spread of misinformation. The interaction between political debates, statements by individual politicians, and hateful campaigns directed at news organizations, individual journalists, and other public figures is an area that merits more in-depth research. Here, it is likewise essential to consider these alarming trends in the development of more advanced artificial intelligence tools, which run the risk of further amplifying and automating harassment campaigns, making them more pervasive and harder to combat.

The potential role of journalists in amplifying online hostility and contributing to the polarization of public debate is another unexplored topic. This consideration arises from observations made during the annotation process in Paper II, which revealed a trend of journalists employing implicational forms of insults in their interactions with commentators on Twitter. This behavior suggests that journalists may, perhaps unintentionally, contribute to the very cycle of aggression and polarization they often find themselves victims of. Future research should delve into this dynamic, examining how journalists' online communication styles might escalate conflicts or foster antagonistic environments. In other words, it is essential to emphasize the bidirectional

nature of online interactions and the influence of journalistic practices in digital spaces on increased hostility towards the press.

As for the theoretical contribution of this thesis, the concept of social disorientation can be extended as a useful socio-legal frame beyond journalism. It can also be applied to other fields affected by digital transformation, such as education, politics, and healthcare, to investigate how social disorientation manifests in these areas and what unique challenges arise. Similarly, the concept of DISC opens new possibilities for research in socio-legal studies. For instance, DISC could be explored across various professional fields to better understand attempts to suppress and undermine perceptions of public debate, thus deepening our understanding of the subtle ways in which public discourse and democratic participation are shaped in the digital age. This approach could be applied to professionals such as politicians and academics, activist groups, and other prominent interest groups active in public debates. Here, opportunities also exist for the field of working life research to deepen its focus on professions in the public eye that play substantial democratic roles. Recognizing these forms of pressure as a workplace issue in the context of social disorientation, particularly when directed at professional groups, is valuable in mitigating its consequences.

The intersection of digital transformation, shifting norms, and the renegotiation of social controls uncovered in this thesis beckons further cross-disciplinary study. Combining insights from sociology, social psychology, psychology, socio-legal studies, media studies, and working life research could yield a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Moreover, the thesis's findings on self-censorship among journalists invite deeper exploration into the factors driving this behavior, both internal and external, including organizational culture, individual resilience, and societal attitudes. Although Paper IV touches upon this, there are possibilities to advance this area even further. Lastly, comparative studies across different countries and media landscapes would enrich our understanding of the cultural and institutional variations in online harassment. While Sweden is unique due to its strong work environment legislation and high rankings in press freedom indices, research indicates that online harassment against journalists is a global phenomenon. Therefore, the findings of this study are likely to be relevant to an international audience.

Practical Implications

There are opportunities for practical application of the results of this thesis, which can be relevant for policymakers, employers and management, and for the profession as a whole. This involves clarifying the potential impact and applicability of the findings in different contexts and outlining possible solutions.

Regarding policy and legal relevance, the findings underscore the need for policymakers to recognize online harassment as a workplace issue that undermines journalistic autonomy and public discourse. While the recent sentence enhancements in Sweden aimed at protecting journalists from attempts to influence their professional conduct are a step in the right direction, particularly in terms of improving journalists' trust in the legal system, the thesis emphasizes that more focus should be placed on strategies to improve journalists' working lives. As argued in this thesis, the manifestation and systematic nature of online harassment necessitate the development of comprehensive strategies that address the broader working environment for journalists to ensure their well-being and sense of security.

In relation to the latter, the thesis shows that news organizations focus heavily on safeguarding the physical safety of journalists; hence, online harassment is often dealt with as a security threat defined by the legality of the offence. Consequently, they have become quite proficient in this area and should continue to develop these management aspects. However, to further strengthen resilience within the profession, more emphasis should be placed on creating practices and solutions that foster a sense of physical security and mental well-being. If online harassment falls outside the scope of criminal law, which it, according to this thesis, often does, then news organizations must adopt a more holistic approach that includes psychological support, robust reporting mechanisms, and educational programs to empower journalists to handle such harassment effectively.

Given the normative and cultural barriers highlighted in Paper III, news organizations must actively and systematically implement comprehensive support systems to address the psychological impacts of online harassment. In doing so, they can progressively dismantle the oppressive perceptions that normalize abuse from third parties outside of the workplace. Here, active and systematic implementation is key. For instance, although mental health resources are available to a certain degree at most news organizations, the stigma of using them in the context of online harassment results in low usage

rates of these services. Thus, mental counselling and stress management programs to help journalists cope with the emotional toll of harassment need to be encouraged to a higher degree.

Similarly, it is crucial to develop organizational policies that explicitly recognize and address online harassment as a workplace issue. These policies should include clear procedures for reporting and dealing with incidents, protections against retaliation, and regular training sessions to educate staff and management on recognizing and handling online harassment and its negative effects. As part of the broader need for systematic recognition and work environment practices, fostering a supportive work culture is essential. Creating an environment where journalists feel supported by their peers and superiors can mitigate the effects of harassment, as found in Paper IV. Therefore, there is a need to promote open communication, offer peer support networks, and ensure that management takes harassment reports seriously and responds promptly when they occur.

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Online Harassment Against Journalists



Based on a mixed-method triangulation, this compilation thesis aims to enhance the understanding of how the evolving digital landscape—particularly the rise of online harassment—influences journalism and its potential repercussions for fostering healthy public discourse. Additionally, the thesis seeks to advance the field of socio-legal studies by dissecting the interplay between digital transformation, shifting norms, and the intersection of formal and informal social controls. Adopting a socio-legal and working-life science perspective, the thesis illustrates how online harassment adversely impacts journalists' health and leads to self-censorship. It frames this issue as a workplace problem, emphasizing that much of the online harassment journalists face falls outside the purview of criminal law. The thesis underscores that journalistic organizations have not sufficiently adapted to these challenges and, therefore, have not yet implemented a systematic approach to address the psychosocial harm caused by online harassment. Furthermore, it demonstrates the urgency to develop such work environment practices, given the coordinated, ideologically, and morally driven attacks on professional journalism. Overall, the thesis shows that formal and informal social controls designed to safeguard the press autonomy are largely incompatible with the rise of online harassment as a means of undermining it.

