BETTER PROTECTION FOR FREELANCERS FACING ONLINE VIOLENCE



THE NEWS SAFETY COHORT AND OUR WORK WITH FREELANCERS

As a continuation of our work supporting newsrooms with issues around online violence, the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) launched our News Safety Cohort, a program working with newsrooms to promote a culture of safety. Through this program we identified that there was both a need and a want from newsrooms to understand how best to support their freelancers with issues around online violence. This was especially important for women and diverse journalists, who are disproportionately affected by online violence.

Focus groups

Over a six-month period, we held three focus groups in partnership with two outlets that work almost exclusively with independent journalists, Cicero Independiente and High Country News. We spoke with 13 freelancers to find out how they could be better supported. This included asking them about their experiences of online violence, how newsrooms had supported them with this issue, and what help they would like to see media outlets offer them. Their feedback and recommendations are laid out in this chapter.

The freelancers we spoke to raised many issues about their safety, not only around online abuse. Unsurprisingly, physical security concerns often took precedence, especially if these were not being addressed by the media outlet. This meant that protecting against online violence was often lower on their list of priorities, despite freelancers acknowledging the risks that involved.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM SPEAKING WITH FREELANCERS

Freelance journalists in our focus groups regularly raised the same issues when it came to discussing their safety and online abuse. We have included these learnings as an aid for newsroom managers who are thinking about how best to support freelancers with issues around online violence.



PHYSICAL SAFETY NEEDS TAKE PRIORITY

If a freelancer is struggling to meet their basic physical safety needs on a story, they are less likely to consider issues around online abuse and have less time to take the necessary steps to protect themselves.



FREELANCERS NEED GREATER GUIDANCE ON PROTECTING AGAINST ONLINE VIOLENCE

Many of the freelancers we spoke to said they did not know where to begin protecting themselves against online violence. They would like access to more guides and resources and for newsrooms to proactively offer that support, as they were worried that asking for it would seem unprofessional.



TIME AND MONEY ARE ISSUES

Freelancers are short on time because of work commitments or because they are looking for work. This means they are less likely to set aside time to take the steps needed to protect themselves from online abuse. Services that would help increase their online safety, such as password managers or a subscription to a data broker removal service, are perceived as too expensive and a cost they are unable to cover.



FREELANCERS NEED DIGITAL SECURITY SUPPORT

While recognizing the importance of digital security, freelancers shared their lack of knowledge around how to carry out digital safety steps. Many felt that digital security required a high time investment that they were unable to make.



THEY WANT FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT FROM NEWSROOMS

Online abuse often happens after a story has been published and the freelancer is no longer working with the newsroom. The freelancers stated that having clear guidance from the outlet around what to do should they be subject to any online attacks would be helpful.

HOW NEWSROOMS CAN SUPPORT FREELANCERS WITH ISSUES AROUND ONLINE VIOLENCE



PHYSICAL SAFETY NEEDS TAKE PRIORITY

Freelancers do not generally have the support of an institution to protect them against online abuse, leaving the freelancer holding all responsibility. They are often short on both time and money which leaves them more exposed to the effects of online violence. Speak with your freelancers and find out what their needs are.

FREELANCERS NEED GREATER GUIDANCE ON PROTECTING AGAINST ONLINE VIOLENCE

Freelancers told us they were reluctant to ask editors for help to avoid seeming problematic. This was an issue for freelancers in an established relationship with an outlet as well as for those starting out with a new newsroom.

BUILD SUPPORT FOR FREELANCERS INTO BEST PRACTICES

As newsrooms start to develop best practice guidance for staff around dealing with online abuse, managers should consider building in support for freelancers from the outset. The freelancers we spoke with mentioned that if they were shown guidance for protecting against online abuse, it only focused on staff and did not account for the challenges they face as freelancers, such as a lack of money or time to put security measures in place.

PROVIDE PRE-EMPTIVE SUPPORT AS WELL AS REACTIVE

Help prepare freelancers for issues around online abuse by carrying out online violence risk assessments, helping them secure their online data, and letting them know what the procedures are if they receive any online attacks. Understand what type of stories result in online harassment and be mindful that, according to research, abuse is worse if the freelancer is a woman or from a diverse background.

KNOW WHAT SUPPORT YOU CAN GIVE FREELANCERS AND BE PROACTIVE ABOUT OFFERING IT

Most freelancers we spoke to said they would like newsrooms to be more proactive when it came to protecting them against online abuse. They want clear guidance about what help they can or cannot receive. All the freelancers we spoke to agreed they would like the newsroom to initiate those conversations, share resources with them, and cover costs for services such as a subscription to a data broker removal service if needed.

AMEND CONTRACTS TO INCLUDE SUPPORT FOR PROTECTING AGAINST ONLINE ABUSE

The freelancers we spoke to frequently raised the issue of inadequate and out-of-date contracts. Many had long-standing relationships with media outlets and had not had their contract revised in a significant amount of time. This left them with no official contract to protect them against online violence. Others were starting out with outlets and stated that protection against online abuse was not included. Some freelancers said it would be useful to include risk assessment processes as part of the contract, to ensure both they and editors would complete one prior to starting work.

TRAIN EDITORS ON HOW TO SUPPORT FREELANCERS

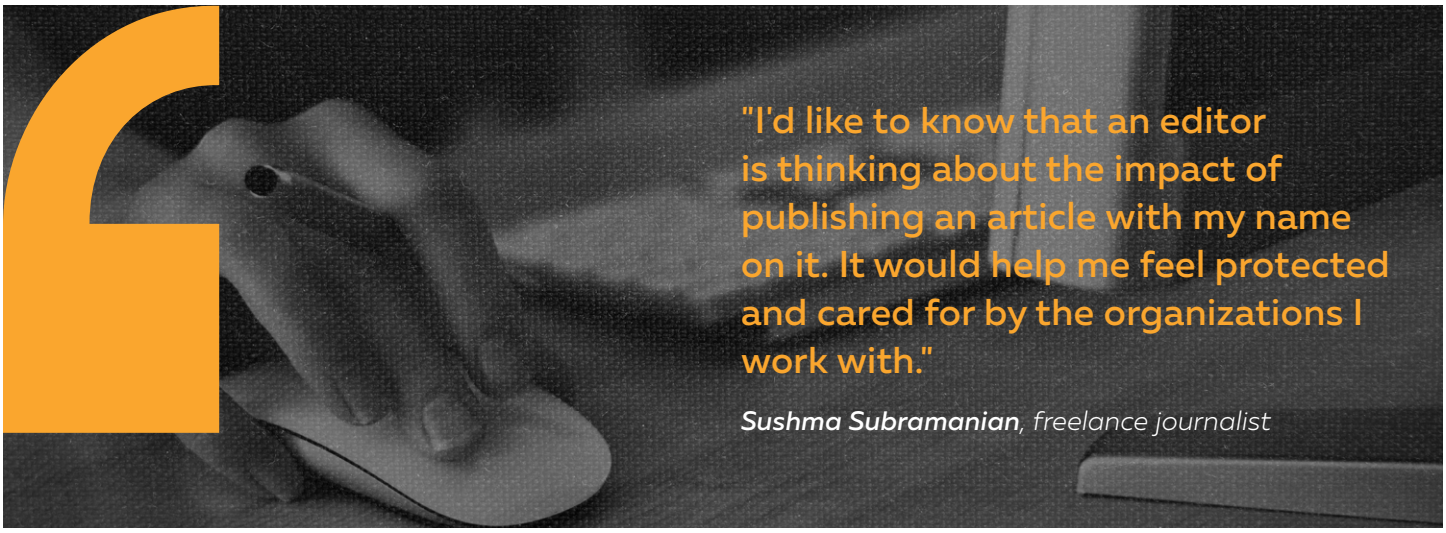
Editors are the first point of contact for a freelancer who either needs pre-emptive support for protecting against online abuse or reactive support because they have been targeted. The freelancers we spoke with said that editors were sometimes unaware of what support the newsroom offered and that they did not know what to do if they reported a case of online abuse. Freelancers would like editors to reach out after a story is published to see how they were navigating any online abuse.

TELL FREELANCERS IF A STORY IS LIKELY TO CAUSE AN ONLINE BACKLASH

Freelancers are often not told whether a story has a history of causing online abuse. They told us they had been sent out to cover topics which were well-known in the newsroom for leaving journalists exposed to harassment online. Having this information in advance would have helped them take steps to better secure their online data before publishing.

CONSIDER PUTTING OUT A STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

Freelancers who are targeted online because of a story often feel isolated and are unsure about whether to respond to abusers or not. All the freelancers we spoke to said having a newsroom speak up in support of them would be massively helpful.



RECOMMENDED STEPS FOR FREELANCERS LOOKING TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM ONLINE VIOLENCE

The following recommendations came out of conversations with freelance journalists around online abuse and how best to protect themselves from it. Most freelancers we spoke with stated that they were unsure where to begin to increase their safety online. They were also uncertain how to broach this issue with outlets. These recommendations are intended as a guide for those looking to do just that. Freelancers are also encouraged to familiarize themselves with the content of our **guide** to help them start that conversation with newsrooms.

STEPS *to take if you* ***don't have*** *the support of a newsroom*

PLAN FOR THE WORST CASE SCENARIO

Think about what your worst-case scenario would be when it comes to online harassment. Are you worried about your accounts being hacked? Do you have concerns about your sources? Are you worried about protecting your home address? Once you have identified your concerns, take steps to reduce the risk. The recommendations below will help with this.

TAKE REGULAR STEPS TO PROTECT YOUR ONLINE DATA

As an independent journalist you will not always receive the support of a newsroom to protect your online data, so it is important to be proactive about regularly reviewing what content is available about you online and taking steps to remove it. This will better protect you and prepare you to deal with an online attack should one occur. Use our **checklist** for help.

BUILD DIGITAL SECURITY INTO YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

Online harassment is often accompanied by digital security issues, such as account hacking. Learn the basics of digital safety, including two-step verification, and build them into your daily online routine. This is something you can do gradually if you are not facing a high risk of attack. Taking steps to increase your digital security knowledge now will mean you are better protected against any possible future attack.

KNOW WHAT TO DO IN THE FACE OF AN ATTACK

Having a plan will help you mitigate the risk. Research in advance how to recover hacked accounts. Think about where you will go if your home address is posted online. Plan who you will need to tell about the attack.

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE FREE SUPPORT AVAILABLE

There is a significant amount of free help available for journalists looking to better protect themselves against online harassment. For more information on how to protect your online data and how to increase your knowledge of digital safety, consult the **Online Violence Response Hub**. This site also includes courses, mental-health resources, and emergency assistance details.

STEPS *to take with a newsroom*

The following recommendations can be used when approaching a newsroom for support with issues of online abuse. These are guidelines only and it is understood that not all freelancers will feel comfortable approaching a newsroom for assistance.

ASK WHETHER THE NEWSROOM HAS A POLICY TO PROTECT STAFF AND FREELANCERS FROM ONLINE ABUSE

Newsrooms may already have guidance in place. Ideally this should lay out what steps you can take to protect yourself and what to do if you are targeted by an online attack.

ENQUIRE WHETHER THE STORY HAS OR COULD RESULT IN ANY ONLINE ABUSE

Ask your editor and, if possible, others in the outlet about the subject you are covering and whether it has resulted in online harassment. Bear in mind that journalists in the newsroom may not have raised the abuse with their editor. It is also important to research whether your story could result in online abuse. Knowing in advance whether a story results in online violence will allow you to take steps to prepare in advance of an attack.

WORK ON A RISK ASSESSMENT

Ask whether the newsroom does risk assessments as part of their support. If not, freelancers can do their own risk assessment either alone or, ideally, with the support of an editor. Use our **risk assessment template** to get started.

ASK WHAT THE NEWSROOM CAN DO TO SUPPORT YOU IF YOU ARE TARGETED BY AN ONLINE ATTACK

This is especially significant if you are covering subjects which are known to cause backlash online. If the newsroom does not provide any support, then you should follow the steps in the section above called steps to take without the support of a newsroom.

KNOW WHAT TECH SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE TO YOU

If you need help securing your accounts, then you may be able to access IT support within the newsroom. Ask your editor whether this is possible. If not, you should review your personal online accounts to ensure you have two-step verification turned on and that you are following best practices for creating secure passwords.

CONSIDER ASKING NEWSROOMS TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR ONLINE ABUSE INTO YOUR CONTRACT

The freelancers we spoke to often had long-term relationships with media outlets with out-dated contracts. While these contracts may cover physical security issues, they often had nothing included around protecting against online abuse.

CASE STUDY

SUPPORTING FREELANCE JOURNALISTS WITH ONLINE VIOLENCE THROUGH BEST PRACTICE

We supported Cicero Independiente over a period of six months with the development of an online violence guide for its freelancers and training that focused on helping them protect their personal data. The newsroom has 15 freelancers it works with on a regular basis. Protecting them was central to our work with the outlet.

ABOUT THE NEWSROOM

Number of journalists in the newsroom

Four full-time staff and 15 freelancers

Location

Cicero and Berwyn, Illinois, U.S.

Type of newsroom

Local online and print newsroom serving the community with bilingual English-Spanish news and storytelling.

HISTORY OF ONLINE ATTACKS

The outlet and those working for it are normally subjected to online harassment from people within the community. These attacks often include attempts to discredit reporters by accusing them of bias and aligning them with political parties in their region. The co-founders have faced significant online aggression, including cases of doxxing.

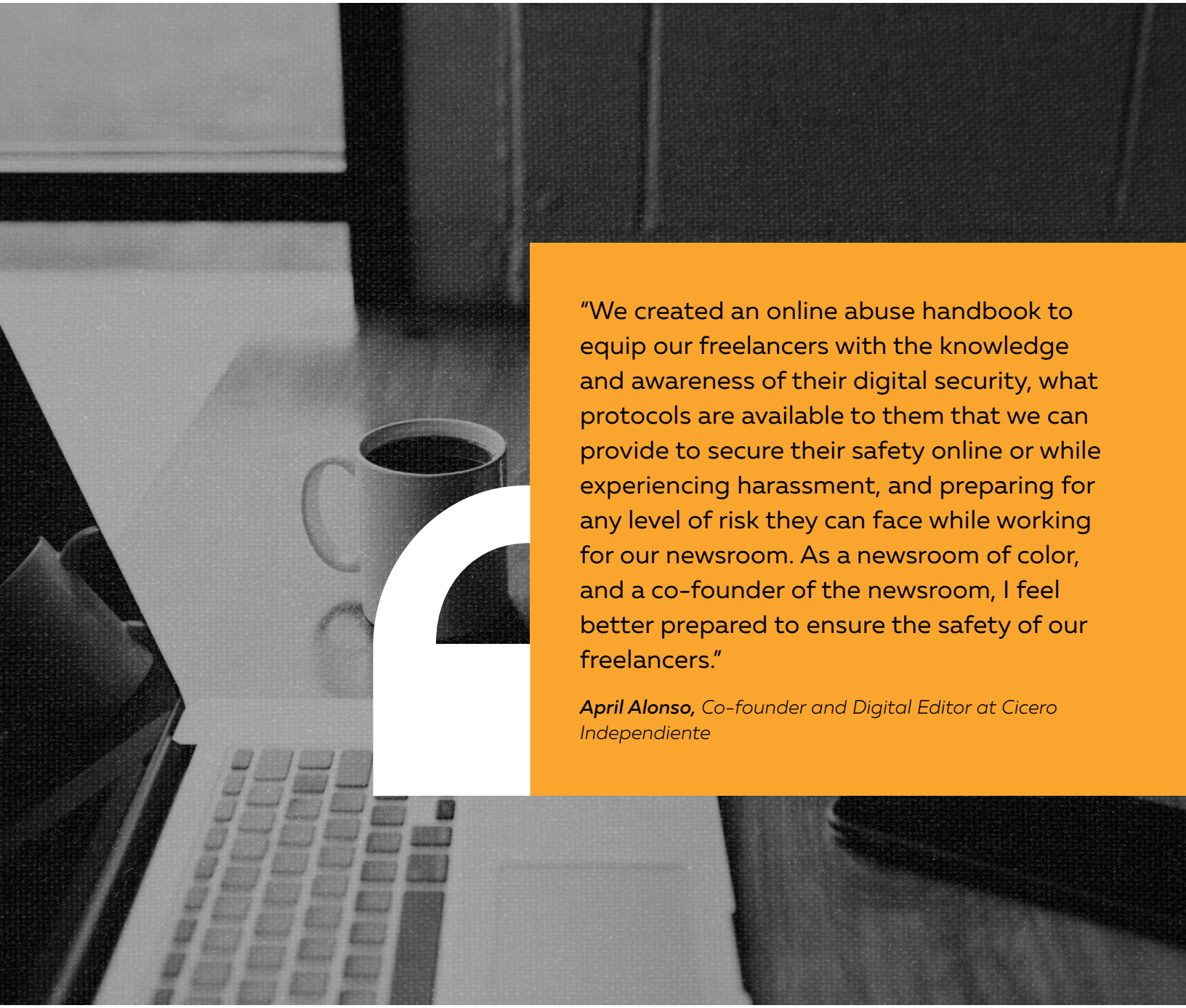
OUR SUPPORT

Cicero Independiente reached out to us for help structuring support to better prepare their freelancers for online attacks. The outlet's co-founder wanted to have a well-structured and easy-to-understand document laying out what the newsroom could and couldn't do for its freelancers. We worked with them to build out a guide including steps to protect personal data and both work and personal online accounts. We also created a simplified escalation policy covering what to do and who to contact if the freelancer receives abuse, is doxxed, or has their accounts hacked. We also provided training to the newsroom on how best to protect personal online data.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Cicero Independiente created and shared their handbook with their freelance community and took some impressive steps to increase the safety of those who work with them. This included signing up 13 of their most at-risk freelancers to a data broker removal site, with a plan to add more people as funding allows. The outlet also has a stipend for journalists who are doxxed and may need to stay elsewhere. Finally, if there are security concerns around a particular story, the outlet is open to pausing publication until the safety of the freelancer is addressed. This is an impressive range of support showing that, no matter the budget, it is possible to put journalist safety at the heart of your newsroom.

You can read Cicero Independiente's guide for freelancers facing online abuse **here**.



"We created an online abuse handbook to equip our freelancers with the knowledge and awareness of their digital security, what protocols are available to them that we can provide to secure their safety online or while experiencing harassment, and preparing for any level of risk they can face while working for our newsroom. As a newsroom of color, and a co-founder of the newsroom, I feel better prepared to ensure the safety of our freelancers."

April Alonso, *Co-founder and Digital Editor at Cicero Independiente*

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MEDIA FOUNDATION

