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Online harassment, social justice, journalism, hate speech, social media, mental health, newsrooms, training, anti-hate laws, marginalized journalists, transphobia, right-wing organizations, algorithm changes, trauma, interview techniques.

**SPEAKERS**

Jay Ashdown, Evan Zeller

**Evan Zeller**

Hey everyone, thanks for tuning in to Behind the Review, a behind the scenes look at the journalistic work of our team here at the Review. This podcast series will serve as a deep dive into the reporting process of our hard-working contributors. In this series, we're unpacking their work in our spring issue and why it's important to tell these stories. Now today, I'm joined by Jay Ashdown. Jay is a final year journalism student serving as our masthead's Head of Research. He has worked at Ricochet Media and the Eye Opener, and occasionally dabbles in film critique for Met Radio. Passionate about journalism with a focus on social justice. He believes strong reporting has the power to upend the status quo. He wrote a piece about journalists who cover social justice issues who are frequently subjected to online hate and tech facilitated harassment. When this happens, perpetrators can be near impossible to hold responsible. Despite this being a years old problem, newsrooms still aren't equipped to deal with it, or they just don't seem to care. Jay, welcome to Behind the Review. Thanks for being here with me today.

**Jay Ashdown**

Hi. Thanks for having me. I'm psyched to be here.

**Evan Zeller**

I'm psyched for you to be here as well. So I just want to start by saying that I thoroughly enjoyed reading your feature. You know, it's a good piece of writing that will speak to many when you find yourself muttering under your breath, that's just not right, which is the case with me.

**Jay Ashdown**

Like it's not new. It's it's kind of sad to see that, like, not much has changed, despite everybody, at least everybody who are women or people of color who have experienced that, who have talked to each other about it. They everybody knows it's happening, but there's still not much change happening. So I was trying to convey some sense of people want this to change, and also some kind of motion towards that, if that makes sense.

**Evan Zeller**

So I guess, like as you say that, because this is not exactly new, what initially sparked your interest in covering this subject?

**Jay Ashdown**

I think in 2024 around last fall, I saw a tweet from the Canada Press Freedom Project. They have a Reporting Portal for journalists to report any incident of press freedom violations, and that includes online hate. And they said, basically, if you've ever experienced any form of harassment or any targeting by the organization honest reporting Canada, then you can report that in our portal. And that was a name that I'd seen a few times from journalists had followed online who had criticized war crimes from Israel, or at least who had mentioned the violence happening in Gaza and in Palestine. I'd also seen that these people have been inundated with tons of hate comments in their replies every time they post about something like that. And I started to think about the organizations behind a lot of online hate against journalists. And looking into it, I noticed that not only organizations, a lot of right wing organizations, but also conservative politicians, had incited this kind of hate against journalists, which fills their inboxes to the point where they can't even be online anymore and feel unsafe being in public. A lot of the times, some people have been stalked by people who have been involved in right wing organizations like diagonal and other hate movements. And it's such a problem that it's hard to unpack, because it's one the format of hate that it perpetuates comes from online media. It's encouraged by online media like pundits who encourage Islamophobic hate or misogynistic hate, or any other form of racist or sexist hate.

**Evan Zeller**

I think that's a great segue into this idea of how, like, with the advent of social media, like, it's made it a lot worse. You know, yeah, online trolls now have, like, a platform, and with like, x's policies changing, you know, there's, you know, the protection, like, against hate speech is not like there anymore. So it's quite unfortunate.

**Jay Ashdown**

That's a big thing on X right now, because I've, I've been on Twitter and X for like, too long, and I should still be on there, because it's, like, so unhealthy. The changes that have happened recently, like online hate on there has existed for so long, for like, not even just public figures, but any woman or person of color that states a political opinion online. But it's especially gotten worse, because now the algorithm that's been kind of influenced, or like, at least changed by Elon Musk, it's really kind of sped up and encouraged more hate to happen. Now you're seeing that kind of like the hateful tweets, like I see that on my on my for you, page, on the platform where I wouldn't have seen it otherwise, because the algorithm used to at least be somewhat kind of catered towards each user's interests, but now it's kind of just encouraging hate from casual misogyny just straight up like not see posting. So it definitely has sped up a lot of the hate that people are experiencing. But at the same time, this is something that I think Nora Loretto helped me learn this. This is something that people have experienced for a long, long time, since the start of Twitter. It's just easier to get that message across to more people now.

**Evan Zeller**

Absolutely. So would you say that a lot of women journalists you spoke to, they find that it's hard for them, or they're hesitant to approach anyone in a position of power, because there's this fear that they won't be taken seriously, or there are not proper procedures in place to help them deal with that?

**Jay Ashdown**

Definitely, a lot of the, I mean, the journalists I spoke to, they're very outspoken about this, so they, I mean, people like them, they wouldn't have any trouble. Like Rumneek Johal, she's an associate editor at Press Progress, so thankfully, she told me that she feels comfortable going to her coworkers and will care about that issue, which is good, but with a lot of legacy news organizations, a lot of journalists have experienced less of a kind of democratic form of management. There places like CBC and the Globe and Mail, people have experienced sometimes it's editors or managers not caring about the online hate or saying like, you know, just get off the internet for a while. But some have also just experienced a lack of knowing from their managers, because a lot of like people in managerial positions or executive positions are white people and a lot of men, they don't really understand the situation enough to really see it as a threat. But the truth is, online, hate can extend into in person hate. It results in actual death threats to people. It's, um, it's a really dangerous thing, and I wish it were taken more seriously.

**Evan Zeller**

Yeah. How scary. Like that. Some people don't understand that it translates to like the real world.

**Jay Ashdown**

Yeah, it's really frustrating.

**Evan Zeller**

Did you ever find like? Did you ever encounter any challenges when gathering sources like, Was anyone like, Was anyone at all hesitant at first, or is it more so they want to, like, speak on this subject?

**Jay Ashdown**

Yeah I mean, everybody spoke to was really eager to speak about it, which is good. I mean, very grateful for it, because it's a really sensitive subject. It's quite literally a source of trauma. But, I mean, the main problem I had was something I knew I would have trouble with from the start, because it's when you experience online hate. Of course, you're going to be wary of some random person asking to interview you, because you don't know who's going to contact you. So I interviewed quite a few people who I'd known and had experienced online hate, a lot of them who are women of color, and of course, they didn't get back to me, which is so fair, because if you just got an email from a random person, it's understandable why you wouldn't talk to them, because a lot of threats come in the forum emails. A lot of people, a lot of organizations, too, have gotten emails that, like were posing as innocuous, and then, after the fact, they, like, used it to infiltrate organizations, to get more information from organizations, to like, further target them, and stuff like that. So I get it. So in that case, it was tough to find sources from the start, because one, I wanted to get people's experiences, but two, I didn't want to pry from anybody, or, like, re traumatize anybody. So I was really grateful to Rumneek and Nora. They were the only two people who had gotten, like, personal experience from for this article. And I'm really, I'm really grateful for their input. They really helped exemplify the the troubles of experiencing and the traumas of experiencing this kind of hate. I will say too, they are kind of special circumstances, because they are people who who persevere despite the continued traumas and the kind of onslaught of hate that really, it really takes a toll, not only on the mental health of their like, their personal lives, but also those impacts, like, obviously translate into how they conduct their work, right, and how they put out their work, and that directly impacts their income. The fact that they could persevere through it is, I wouldn't say brave, because everybody who experiences this is brave and like, it's also so understandable if you kind of can't deal with online Hate, because it's, it's kind of designed to to not be able to, does that make sense? No, designed to bring you in. Well, yeah, exactly. But yeah, because something that Rumneek told me was that a lot of people, at least a couple people she knew, had quit the industry because they couldn't deal with the onset of, like, online hate. Because it also comes in forms of, like, emailing. There's no sometimes it turns into sending letters. Sometimes it turns into people stalking you. It's overwhelming, so it's understandable to leave the industry. And I just, I really admire those journalists who keep pushing forward with their work.

**Evan Zeller**

Oh, absolutely. I wonder, did any of them, like, share any kind of techniques or, like, balancing, like, how they managed to balance the onslaught of online hate with their personal lives? Like, did they talk about, like, taking up any kind of mental health pastimes to help them deal with that or find that balance in their lives?

**Jay Ashdown**

Honestly, I don't think so. No, I always, which sucks.

**Evan Zeller**

No, no. I'm always just curious about that angle. It's like, how did they, like, go about doing that? Because, as you said, we're all human, and so people who aren't, like, you know, able to cope with there's nothing shameful about that. But like, for the people that are, I do wonder, what is it that they did? Exactly? So that's something I'm perpetually thinking of, like, how do you balance that in this industry, when there's, you know, you have to constantly be, like, you know, producing

**Jay Ashdown**

Definitely, that's the thing. You can't really take, like, a mental health break, especially if you're a freelance journalist, right there you have, you have to get the next article. You have no time. Oh, like, especially you have, you have little benefits if you're a freelance journalist. Thankfully, Nora runs the Canadian Freelance Union, so that's something that helps try to provide those benefits for people, and I think has succeeded in that, which is very it's very helpful. But, yeah, one thing that multiple people told me was that their kind of sense of what keeps them going is the kind of drive to keep putting out work despite everything that's happening to them, because they just care so much about the journalism that they're putting out and the issues they're talking about that they're, they're willing to persevere despite everything which isn't best for your mental health, yeah, but, um, but it's, it's really brave, I think, very brave, definitely. I Rachel Gilmore, I didn't interview her, but she's talked about that a lot online.

**Evan Zeller**

You could have fooled me, by the way, the way you set up the scene. I was like, and then I looked in, like, you're on, like, your in person, like wow.

**Jay Ashdown**

Oh, that was fake. You. That was another thing that came up, like, on my timeline, just like randomly, that I'd seen. It was a call with, with a police officer who she was reporting. She was reporting a death threat sent to Erica. I feel who it was just sent to Erica, but it was, it mentioned Rachel Gilmore, other journalists who are mostly women of color. And it said some like you'll see in the in the article, it said some horrible things. They came with pictures of, like, a weird stalker style, like red yarn style column like wall that they'd pasted of the of images of these women with slurs written over them. And I she posted a video of her on a phone call with the police officer, or at least with a police reporting hotline. And when she talked to this, when she talked to this hotline, she mentioned everything that happened, everything that was written in the email that was horrific to hear. And then this police officer, or this, this respondent just kept asking unrelated questions, like, after she described the whole email, there was a pause, and she said, so this wasn't sent directly to you, as if that was the point I know, and none of it, like all the stuff that should have mattered to this person didn't matter, and in the end, it was dismissed

**Evan Zeller**

Exactly.

**Jay Ashdown**

So, yeah, that was one thing where it really illustrated, like a lot of journalists have figured out, you can't really rely on police to help you with this kind of stuff. In in rare cases, the person will be found and will be penalized. But the internet is so it's so easy to, you know, use a VPN when you're using social media or to make anonymous multiple anonymous burner accounts when you're really trying to bombard somebody with online hate that a lot of the time, these people don't get found, and a lot of the time police also don't care enough to try and find them. So it's a lot of journalists feel like they're on their own in that case.

**Evan Zeller**

Honestly, when you, when you, when I read that in your piece, like, how a lot of like, you know, online trolls will go as far as to create brain or accounts, part of me saying, like, you have too much time on your hands. Like, what are you doing?

**Jay Ashdown**

Like, yeah, it's like, I don't know. It's like, jobless behavior. I don't know. I don't even Chris.

**Evan Zeller**

I was like, what? Like, do you not have hobbies like, what? No,

**Jay Ashdown**

I mean, they don't. That's their hobby. I used to really study like, people like Jordan Peterson, people like Ben Shapiro, because I always wondered what gives them these massive followings, and it's the scapegoating that makes people feel especially working people who maybe, like, you know, there's a lot of people like, there's a kind of trend of, like, anti immigration sentiment being like, kind of a lot of working class people who feel as though their jobs are being taken away, which is one like, if you feel like you're being victimized by people of color, by immigrants and by women for massage and stick men and in cells. Like, if you feel like if you feel like you're being victimized by women and other minorities, then you're definitely gonna fight back against them, against this so called oppression that you're experiencing as a white male. And that's what a lot of conservative or right wing media makes people feel, and that's what pushes them towards that. So does that make sense?

**Evan Zeller**

It does. It's just sad that that's the thing that unites all of them, like this common like, yeah, hate and yeah, it all comes from a place of ignorance too,

**Jay Ashdown**

Definitely. And that's like, that's, that's another bad thing with X, like, changing its algorithm, because it pushes more anti immigration, racist, sexist media that eventually reaches more people and radicalizes more people into committing online hate and harassment. It's tough. I don't like it.

**Evan Zeller**

I don't either. What are some of the biggest goals or hopes you had in writing this piece?

**Jay Ashdown**

One of my goals, and also goals that I think, especially Sarah laddick and the participants of that JHR study said, was we need better training for online hate, like better workplace training to deal with online hate and to navigate online spaces. And that the people who are experiencing online hate, they mostly know how to navigate online spaces. It's the people who are in charge and are supposed to provide protections for these people. I'm talking like, you know, like managers and editors who are in charge of especially freelance journalists, they at this point, they should know that the internet is changing all the time. You can't really train just based on like, one version of Twitter or something, because that's also constantly changing. And platforms where people experience most of the Hey, it's constantly changing, changing. I think it used to be more more heavy on on Facebook, maybe, but now it's kind of migrated to be heavily towards Instagram comments and X so continuous education and listening to the experiences of marginalized journalists should be a core facet of management in the journalism industry, and I really hope that this article encourages that honestly and also I think. This was mentioned by Paris Marx too, but he did say that, like it kind of feels impossible now, considering the dominance of social media platforms over like, our immediate economy, but pushing for more anti hate media laws that apply to social media platforms is going to be huge for creating this kind of violent hate. Like it won't be economically good for us, as we seem, a C-18, but introducing more like punitive measures against social media platforms to try and curb online hate on those platforms will definitely be a good start towards making journalists lives a lot easier.

**Evan Zeller**

So I just also want to ask like, you know, obviously you had to do a lot of research going into this piece, or perhaps you already had a lot of knowledge on the subject, but what were some things you learned while reporting on this issue, whether that's like perspective game that, like, you know, you weren't aware of at the exception of this piece?

**Jay Ashdown**

Yeah, I think I was already obsessed with this talk because, because, like, being trans online, I had already, like, seen other trans people like experience, especially from people like lives with TikTok and other like online right wing tabloids, people like me have already experienced a lot of online hate, So I was already invested in that side of it, where I had kind of a personal interest in it. Similar thing where, like, if Liz of Tiktok posts a random trans person for no reason other than to hate and incite hate, then that trans person who isn't even the public eye is suddenly experiencing death threats and letters to their door and gets doxxed and gets the police at their door to be harassed, stuff like that. And from then on, I've always, like, been interested in, like, trying to research the sources of online hate. Initially, that was just for my own, like, knowledge. I mean, there's nothing, it feels like. There's not much that we personally can do, but just to, like, keep tabs on what's happening. And then, thankfully, I was able to translate that interest into I've been doing some assistant research for the open digital literacy and Action Network, which is currently working on a report on on online anti trans hate. And that's been, it's not like, like, very good for your mental health, but it's still like, it helps to not just know about what's happening and not just experience it, but actually be able to put out some work that trend influences the world to change Absolutely. So that's been really helpful. And then that's kind of why I wanted to do this story, because for that, I'm helping out with this very like scholarly kind of report on the issue, but I wanted to see what it'd be like to try and lay out the issue just in a feature format. And I think I got off topic a little bit.

**Evan Zeller**

No not all, not at all. I'm very, I'm very glad that you shared that. So you're, obviously, you're publishing this piece for the review, but in the work that you're also doing on the side, you're also trying to, like, also kind of publish this on a wider scale, or like, have it like, circulate amongst like, a wider readership as well.

**Jay Ashdown**

Definitely. I mean, I'm only doing a literature review of it, but the work of the research officer Evan Vipond there, and people like Stephanie Johnson, these are people who who work in that organization, they care so much about just really getting the word out to as many people as they can about the impacts and causes of online hate against trans people and against minorities. So yeah, getting to do that work is rewarding for everybody in that company, because it's like, we all want people to see what's happening, and not only that, but like, recommend changes and try and influence change. And that's that's why I love journalism too, because there's a sense of, like, objectivity, of course, where, like, you know you're not supposed to try and do anything with your work or try and make a statement with your work at the same time, it's like, it is really rewarding to get to put out work that changes people's minds or opens up people to new perspectives on issues that they hadn't known about before, and hopefully, with new knowledge available to people, they can be encouraged to change things in the industry.

**Evan Zeller**

Absolutely. I always love that idea of like, you know, as long as you kind of approach it a subject from like, a willingness to learn, like, that's always, that's always very like, helpful that offers some hope for the future. So now, with this like experience behind you, having, you know, the feature and done all your reporting. What were some of your main takeaways from the experience?

**Jay Ashdown**

Hmm, this is unrelated to, like, kind of, what I've been talking about already, but on just like, a young journalist level, like getting to learn how to interview people better has been huge for me, because I've never been good at, like, feature style, like personable interviewing. A lot of my experience, I've been best at, like, hard news interviewing where it's like, what happened when it happened. So my interview with Renee, I feel bad about that, because I was very like, it felt more matter of fact and like a conversation where I had, like, I had, like, a set list of questions. And I realized, like, this topic, it's so personal, it doesn't a lot of the time. You don't need to just ask question by question by question. We should just let the let the person who has experienced it lead the conversation. That's a big thing that I learned from that, and I'm so I'm so grateful for this process, and I'm grateful to remeak for taking out my really bad interviewing style. But yeah, after that, I really learned how to how to open up, to making interviews a more two way street, and sharing more of myself in interviews, and giving people the space to open up more, and that's really not from a journalistic standpoint, like getting stuff out of people, but it's really helped me, like, connect with people more in in the work, getting to talk to people about the issues they care about has been really, a really great part of this process.

**Evan Zeller**

That's so lovely to hear. That was a very wholesome moment right there. But yeah. Anyway, thank you so much for being here today. I loved having this conversation with you.

**Jay Ashdown**

Thanks for having me. You're really great to talk to.

**Evan Zeller**

I'm your host. Evan Zeller, this episode was produced by me, Tajae Gustavus and Chloe Kim. If you enjoyed this episode, explore all of our podcasts in the podcast tab of reviewofjournalism.ca. Thanks for listening.