

Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation
The Digital News Media and Online Harassment

Tuesday 21 July 2020

Presentations by Shiori Ito, independent Japanese journalist, documentary film-maker, and author of *Black Box* (2017), and Dr Julie Posetti, Global Director of Research at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).

Ms Ito began by thanking the diverse global audience for joining the event. She said that though she was happy to join the event, she had initially been hesitant about participating. Not only is it difficult still for her to talk about her experiences, but she had decided not to talk about the online harassment she had received after she resolved to take the issue to legal authorities, needing a ‘detox’ from the internet. Thus it had taken time for her to decide to participate in this webinar.

Ms Ito explained that she is a rape survivor, and decided to talk publicly about it in 2017. As the people involved were in the media industry, she was told that if she spoke publicly about it she would not be able to work in Japan, as the man she was accusing was a high-profile journalist. The issue itself of rape and sexual violence is quite a taboo topic in Japan; as a journalist, she discovered how backward the legal system and social support network is in Japan when it comes to issues like this. She was shocked that the media would not even discuss such issues: they were very unpopular topics to cover, the subject would always be changed quickly, and media figures would not even use the term ‘rape’, but opt instead for softer words such as violation, which has the effect of making the issue unclear even when it is being discussed.

Another problem, Ms Ito said, is that fewer than 5% of victims of rape report the crime of which they were victims to the police, and even when they do, the police do not always file a report or make a case file. Consequently, it is difficult to estimate accurately how prevalent the problem is in Japan, as over 95% of rape cases go unreported. Rape is in fact one of the most underreported crimes in Japan, as in many countries around the world, so for Ms Ito to talk about her experience publicly was quite a big step. Although she did not want to talk about it at all, she felt that she needed to create pressure to improve the situation, highlight the issue, and change the law. Fortunately, after she had come forward with her story, many other women and activists spoke out, leading to a change in the law in 2017. Though it was just a small step in some senses, she said, the rape law in Japan had previously not changed for 110 years, so it was very significant that they managed to get it changed.

After she had spoken out in public, however, she immediately encountered online harassment. Although she had wanted to stay anonymous and did not reveal her family name, people investigated her online and exposed her name and family, trying to find photos of her and trying to expose some perceived hidden political agenda, and so she received an intense and desperate backlash of harassment. It made it difficult for her even just to walk on the street and keep living in Japan.

Ms Ito said that it was a totally new experience for her, receiving waves of anger and harassment, and threats of physical violence. She said that though all these threats were made online, she was scared and unsure whether people were serious when they said they wanted to attack her, which it made it very difficult to live in Japan. Luckily, she was able to move to stay with friends in the UK to escape this situation, where she also found it easier to be able to discuss the issue from the outside, while it was far more difficult to address it in the domestic Japanese media. Further, the #MeToo movement, which came to global prominence following the allegations against Harvey Weinstein in 2017, helped her to have a voice, she said, and though unfortunately it did not take hold in Japan to the same extent as it did in Western countries, it has changed the landscape today.

Unfortunately, Ms Ito went on, she has been receiving threats online constantly since she came forward in 2017. It was difficult to know what to do about them, how seriously to take them, and whether

she should report them. It was easiest for her personally not to look at them and thereby pretend that they didn't exist. On the advice of friends, however, she did report one threat to the police which had made her feel that her life was truly threatened. She struggled to understand why people felt the need to send threats in response to her simply seeking to end sexual violence, and after a time decided that, as a journalist, she wanted to report on the issue and find out why such online harassment happens. This meant that she had to read a number of the messages she had been sent, which had a real physical effect on her – her body started to shake and she went cold from fear and angst, and did not feel safe even living in Japan.

Ms Ito said that the wake-up call for her was hearing the news of the death of Hana Kimura, a professional wrestler and star of the Japanese reality TV show 'Terrace House'. Ms Kimura had also been the recipient of a torrent of online abuse, and tragically took her own life at the age of 22. After hearing this story, Ms Ito felt that she needed to take action, and with a team of researchers analysed some of the comments that she had personally received online; they looked at over 700,000 comments that she had received, which was not the full number but only a certain portion. They aimed to find out what kind of comments were being made and on which platforms.

She said that 75% of Twitter users in Japan are anonymous, not displaying their real name, compared to roughly 35% in the USA, showing how many people are deliberately hiding their identity in the Japanese online world. After four months of gathering data and following the news of Hana Kimura's death, Ms Ito and her team decided that they needed to take legal action. They sought to make it clear that not only those who write abuse, but also those who like and share it online, should be considered responsible in the perpetration of online harassment. To those who might say this is an excessive response, Ms Ito pointed out what a powerful tool simple words can be: they killed Ms Kimura and they almost killed her. To see hundreds of thousands of people liking and sharing threats against one can be hugely intimidating. They are therefore preparing more lawsuits to try to tackle these online trolls.

As part of the lawsuits they were bringing, they offered each online user who perpetrated these attacks a chance to make an official apology in return for having their name removed from the list of accused trolls. But none of the users accepted this deal – Ms Ito said that this showed that these people somehow felt that they were doing something right and just, as they refused to back down even in the face of legal recriminations. She argued that one of the problems is that in Japan children are not taught to have discussions, or how to debate and disagree in a healthy way, and as a consequence if someone expresses disagreement with a particular opinion held by another person, this will often be perceived as a wider attack on that person's whole character. Thus, she said, one necessary step is to teach people how to engage in discussions about a particular topic without interpreting a disagreement on one issue as a personal attack against them more generally. Ms Ito said that she had reached out to some of her (less extreme) online harassers, to try to open a discussion and understand why they had attacked her, but had had no responses. She suspected, however, that many of them would be lashing out at others due to difficulties in their own lives – this was the case with some of Hana Kimura's harassers, who after her death wrote apologies to her mother explaining that they had sent abuse due to problems they were experiencing themselves.

One issue is that in Japanese law in order to pursue a lawsuit against an online harasser, one has to have two lawsuits: first to prove that the messages were 'hate messages' - if this is successful then the court will find out the name and address of the user - and then one has to bring another lawsuit to make an official case against the abuser. This means that legal action against online abusers takes twice as long and costs twice as much money, which is difficult and discouraging to anyone who might want to take such legal action. Ms Ito is therefore trying to pressure the government to make this process simpler and quicker, in order to avoid prohibitively complex and expensive legal hurdles and to allow people who receive harmful online messages to have recourse to effective and easy legal action. She is also trying to get people online to understand how much this abuse can affect victims, for whom even though it may not be a physical attack it may have serious physical consequences, not to mention emotional and psychological consequences.

Ms Ito finished by saying that after much time disguising herself in public in Japan through fear, she decided she no longer wanted to have to hide herself all the time and to live in fear of attack. She discovered that though some people did recognise her, everyone who spoke to her in person was supportive and offered her words of encouragement and kindness. This demonstrated the vast difference between the online world of harassment and the offline, in-person world, where she has never received the same messages. This shows how easy it is to say harmful things online due to the cloak of anonymity, and why an easier legal process for responding to online harassers is necessary.

Dr Posetti then began to put Ms Ito's experience into context, noting that it is mirrored around the world by particularly vociferous online abuse against female journalists like Ms Ito, and female human rights defenders. She noted that there is now a situation where online violence causes women around the world to feel "doubly silenced" – where they cannot speak up about the threats they face without receiving brutal digital attacks. She argued that we need to start re-thinking these issues as a convergent threat, and one which indeed displays some of the features of "kinetic warfare".

Calling it the "new front line", Dr Posetti explained that this is a convergence of the physical safety threats that female journalists have traditionally faced in international war zones: those threats include the use of rape as a weapon of war, not just against female journalists and human rights defenders, but also against female citizens in countries that are engaged in conflict. But these digital, psychological, and physical safety threats that female journalists now face are overlapping and inseparable. Furthermore, they are terrifying where they intersect, and potentially deadly.

Dr Posetti continued by explaining that research proves that these online threats of violence do carry a risk of offline violence, including the threat of murder with impunity. She gave as examples the cases of Gauri Lankesh, an Indian journalist who wrote about the increasing threats posed to democracy by Hindu nationalism in India, who was assassinated in 2017, and Daphne Caruana Galizia, the Maltese investigative journalist who was brutally murdered by a car bomb the same year. Both these women were targeted with brutal online abuse before their murders. This demonstrates the correlation between online threats and offline acts of violence. For female journalists, she said, the very suggestion that a woman should have a voice or might put her head above the parapet to speak truth to power is incendiary in the minds of misogynists online. Thus we see women journalists in particular being singled out for online assault. We also see a pernicious threat where online harassment and violence intersect with disinformation campaigns, including orchestrated state-based disinformation campaigns.

There is a parallel threat of privacy erosion, Dr Posetti continued. Digital attacks can include threats to online privacy and security through phenomena like doxxing and spoofing; doxxing is the publication online of personal information about someone, such as their physical address, which can put female journalists at risk of physical attack, while spoofing is the impersonation of someone else, in this context through fake accounts masquerading as particular female journalists in order to discredit them. These online threats to women are often sexualised, frequently including graphic threats of sexual violence. Such threats are often aimed not only at the victim, but also at women close to them, such as female family members, female friends, and female colleagues and collaborators.

Dr Posetti identified three key elements of the convergent threats of the new frontline. The first is the way they are networked: sometimes they are organic attacks, as with so-called 'patriotic trolling'. This was evident in the case of female journalists in the US who wrote work which was critical of President Donald Trump, and found themselves the target of bands of Trump supporters sending abuse to them organically as a response to that. At other times the attacks are organised, as seen with paid troll armies and 'sock puppet networks', fraudulent accounts set up by black propaganda public relations firms, and even other actors connected to state-orchestrated campaigns. Further to this, there are misogynistic mobs who join in harassment for the purpose of sport and to silence the voices of women. The second element is digital security and privacy threats. It is very important for female journalists to be extremely careful to protect their privacy online, and to ensure their digital security is strong so that their devices are not able to be easily hacked. Threats in this area include doxxing and spoofing, as mentioned, as well as phishing,

malware, mass surveillance, and device seizures. The third element is ‘radiation’: the sources, audiences, and supporters of targeted journalists often also come under attack. It is particularly worrying when the journalists’ sources are targeted, as this undermines the practice and safety of journalism itself.

The attacks against female journalists manifest in a number of ways, Dr Posetti said. In addition to verbal abuse and threats of violence, harassment can take the form of deepfakes – fabricated synthetic video and audio designed to undermine and discredit, and also to humiliate, the victim. Because of our proximity to digital devices, this abuse can be incredibly intimate in delivery, as well as in detail. She shared a quote by Swedish journalist Alexandra Pascalidou, who described the inescapable nature of this abuse and called it “constant warfare”. She also shared a quote from 2016 by the feminist author Caroline Criado Perez, describing the horrific acts of torture and sexual violence which had been threatened against her by men online. When a hacker discovered and posted her address online, in the context of these threats of awful violence, Criado Perez described feeling “hunted” and “terrified”.

Dr Posetti went on to mention a number of other female journalists who have been victims of prominent abuse online: Ferriall Haffajee, a respected South African editor; Jessikka Aro, a Finnish journalist; Jessica Valenti, a *Guardian* columnist; Zoë Quinn, an American game developer who was attacked as part of the ‘gamergate’ controversy; Rana Ayyub, an Indian investigative reporter; and Maria Ressa, a Filipina journalist who has been extensively targeted by the Duterte regime.

The case of Maria Ressa is particularly useful to look at, Dr Posetti said, as hers is an emblematic case of harassment against female journalists. She is the centre of a “perfect storm” of the various types of attacks and threats that have been mentioned, both from individual and co-ordinated attackers. What is further important is the concept of ‘platform capture’ – when a news organisation or journalist has effectively been captured by a media platform. In the case of Maria Ressa, the platform in question is Facebook: 99% of all Filipinos who use the internet have accounts with Facebook, which they in fact simply call ‘the internet’. News organisations in the Philippines have become completely dependent on Facebook to disseminate their news and operate online, yet Facebook perpetually fails to take significant or effective action to defend and protect journalists who are reliant on the platform, Dr Posetti said. It is the responsibility of social media platforms to deal effectively and swiftly with this problem. Further, it must be acknowledged that the issue of journalists being silenced by this abuse is a fundamental threat to freedom of expression in the form of a threat to journalism, safety, and media freedom; conversely, the argument of social media platforms (that creating accountability and trying to suppress this kind of hateful conduct is somehow trying to undermine freedom of speech), which they use to justify failing to tackle this problem, must be strongly rebutted.

Dr Posetti pointed out that Maria Ressa had just been found guilty in the Philippines on trumped-up charges of criminal libel, as part of state-coordinated attacks on her and her news organisation, Rappler; she now faces up to 100 years in gaol. These attacks have been fuelled by online violence and coordinated, disinformation-laced campaigns, and Facebook’s failure to take action on or try to prevent the predicament she finds herself in demonstrates the social network’s extreme lack of accountability. Its failure to prevent the harassment of her and her organisation (among others) is consequently jeopardising media freedom, leading to Maria Ressa’s claim that Facebook broke democracy in the Philippines.

Dr Posetti concluded by outlining the intent of malicious actors who target women in these ways: to silence women; to discredit and sully the reputations of female journalists and their journalism or journalistic outlets; to increase the risk to and fear among female journalists; to repress credible and critical reporting; to expose and endanger journalists’ sources; to reduce the participation of female journalists, sources, and audiences in public debates and online communities; to manipulate public opinion for political gain; and to undermine media freedom and the public’s right to know. She said that in order to combat these campaigns of harassment and hate there is a responsibility for everyone to work together collaboratively across boundaries in an interdisciplinary way, describing the importance of lending support to journalists receiving this online harassment.

The webinar then moved to a question and answer session. One question for Ms Ito asked her why she thought she had received criticism from certain Japanese women, when most women had been overwhelmingly supportive. Ms Ito responded that she couldn't be entirely sure but suspected that it had something to do with a previous attitude that women just had to accept and endure the pain of harassment without speaking out about it, so certain women perhaps resent her for criticising this aspect of Japanese society rather than adjusting to live with it.

Dr Posetti was asked whether she was optimistic about the future and whether she believed social media platforms were beginning to understand the impact on real people of online misogynistic language and intimidation. Dr Posetti responded that the failure of platforms to deal with the issue when it comes to harassment of female journalists is a failure to accept international human rights law responsibilities, and a failure to ensure the protection and safe conduct of individuals online. She said that in her view the biggest problem is the business model of the platforms: hate is profitable for them, which means they are not likely to want to curtail it from a business point of view. Consequently, dramatic structural change is needed to address the core of the problem; unfortunately the actions of a few activists are not enough, when what is needed is a multi-faceted tackling of the problem by legal authorities, industry leaders, tech companies, and more.