

Sept. 1, 2022

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0A2

Delivered by email

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

We are writing in relation to the increasing and alarming online hate and harassment targeting journalists and journalism as a profession. This is a global problem, which threatens not only the safety and well-being of journalists, but the proper functioning of democracy itself. Many countries are now working on plans to fight back. We are calling on Canadian police and policymakers to do the same.

For the most part, these attacks are aimed at racialized and female journalists who are experiencing an increasing number of targeted, vile threats of violence. The trend is clear. In a 2021 Ipsos survey of journalists, 72 per cent of respondents said they had experienced some form of online harassment. At the time, the CAJ co-signed a statement with many Canadian media organizations, affirming that "there can be no tolerance for hate and harassment of journalists or for incitement of attacks on journalists for doing their jobs." Yet the problem grows. The volume and nature of the rhetoric in the recent string of attacks has caused many journalists, as well as their respective organizations, to fear for their safety.

We are asking police forces to take several immediate steps to address the current incidents and to work with our organizations to combat abuse of journalists and all victims of online hate and harassment.

First, many of the threatening emails use similar language, the language commonly used by domestic extremist groups. Yet because forces require an individual complaints for each incident, and because each incident appears to be treated discretely, we are concerned that the connections among cases and the connections to extremist groups will be missed and that, therefore, this approach could fail to meet the threat. Journalists who have stepped up to publicly support the complainants have themselves been targeted by abusive emails, suggesting the abuse cannot be treated simply as separate incidents, but instead warrants a comprehensive and cooperative approach across forces, regardless of geography.

Second, we ask that police forces review and improve their respective processes for making complaints of hate speech and harassment. On several occasions, journalists from our organizations have experienced difficulty reporting incidents of harassment to police, waiting hours on the phone and in some cases being treated insensitively or dismissively by officers. This not only discourages victims from complaining but adds to the already-considerable trauma they're experiencing.

Third, we believe that greater transparency and dialogue are essential as we work towards our shared goal of keeping journalists – and all targets of hate – safe.

In particular, we ask that:

- a process be established whereby media organizations can provide police with summaries of multiple incidents and patterns of abuse that might not be apparent when police rely solely on the reports of individual complainants;
- police provide regular updates to complainants on the progress of investigations and actions taken; and,
- to both help police and reduce the burden on complainants, media organizations be given a formal role in filing complaints on behalf of or with journalists who have become targets of hate and harassment.

Beyond law enforcement, social media platforms, which are a major channel for the dissemination of hate and harassment, bear significant responsibility for fighting this scourge. There is much room for improvement, in terms of both urgency and effectiveness, in how these companies respond to complaints of abuse on their platforms.

On this and other issues, policymakers, too, have a part to play. Hate and threats hurled at journalists have a chilling effect that is bad for democracy. That is among the reasons cited in a recent position paper, prepared for the Council of Europe, that calls on all member nations to pull together relevant government ministries, law enforcement agencies, social media companies and civil society, including journalists, to develop national plans to protect journalists and thus democracy. Several countries are well advanced in this effort. We call on the federal government to do the same for Canada.

It is increasingly evident that online abuse is a growing problem for people in our industry and beyond. We have seen up close the terrible toll that such threats and hate can take. This is a profound and spreading social harm that we cannot afford to ignore and that we must find ways to counter. We all have a stake in this fight.

We the undersigned,

Black Press Media
Canada's National Observer
Canadaland
Canadian Association of Black Journalists, The (CABJ)
Canadian Association of Broadcasters, The (CAB)
Canadian Association of Journalists, The (CAJ)
Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma
Canadian Journalism Foundation, The (CJF)
Canadian Press, The
CBC/Radio-Canada
CityNews

Coalition For Women In Journalism, The (CFWIJ)
CWA Canada – The Media Union
Discourse Community Publishing
Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, La (FPJQ)
Glacier Media Group
Global News
Globe and Mail, The
Green Line, The
Hill Times, The
Journalists for Human Rights (JHR)
J-Schools Canada
La Presse
Logic, The
Media Girlfriends
Metroland Media Group
Narwhal, The
National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada (NEPMCC)
Native American Journalists Association, The (NAJA)
New Canadian Media
News Media Canada
OMNI News
Overstory Media Group
PEN Canada
Postmedia
Press Forward
Press Progress
Quebecor
Soleil, Le; et les Coops de l'information
Toronto Star
TVO
Unifor
Village Media
Walrus, The
West End Phoenix, The
Winnipeg Free Press, The
World Press Freedom Canada

CC:

The Honourable Marco Mendicino, P.C., M.P.
The Honourable Marci Ien, P.C., M.P.
The Honourable David Lametti, P.C., M.P.
The Honourable Seamus O'Regan, P.C., M.P.
The Honourable Pablo Rodriguez, P.C., M.P.
Mr. Yves-François Blanchet, leader of the Bloc Québécois

Amita Kuttner, Interim leader, Green Party of Canada

Mr. Jagmeet Singh, leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada

Mr. Scott Aitchison, M.P., federal leadership candidate, Conservative Party of Canada

Mr. Roman Baber, federal leadership candidate, Conservative Party of Canada

Mr. Jean Charest, P.C., federal leadership candidate, Conservative Party of Canada

Dr. Leslyn Lewis, M.P., federal leadership candidate, Conservative Party of Canada

Mr. Pierre Poilievre, P.C., M.P., federal leadership candidate, Conservative Party of Canada