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To cite this article: Silvio Waisbord (2020): Trolling Journalists and the Risks of Digital Publicity, Journalism Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2020.1827450](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1827450)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1827450>



Published online: 29 Sep 2020.



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## Trolling Journalists and the Risks of Digital Publicity

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### ABSTRACT

The global phenomenon of trolling of journalists lays out the ambivalent consequences of news interactivity and the risks of digital publicity. The push for digital publicity made journalists more exposed to attacks amid rising digital hate and the populist demonization of the news media. The negative impact of trolling reveals important blind spots of aspirational visions about the consequences of audience interactivity for journalism. The troubling consequences of trolling raise important questions for journalism studies. How to rethink the notion of the public in journalism when newsrooms experience “participation fatigue”, disappointment, and frustration with audience engagement? What if members of the public refuse to play by the rules of civility and tolerance? What if interactive platforms are vehicles for hate rather than reason, facticity, listening, or critical thinking? Addressing these questions is necessary to produce nuanced arguments about journalism, the public and publicity.

### KEYWORDS

Trolling; audience engagement; news interactivity; publicity; journalism; Violence against the press

## Introduction

*Fresno Bee* educational reporter Mackenzie Mays became the target of online trolling after she published stories on sex education and teen pregnancy in local schools in early 2018. In one story, she reported that Brooke Ashjian, board president of the Fresno School District, made derogatory comments about LGBT “lifestyle,” and that he had settled a defamation suit prompted by his remarks. The story sparked much criticism and demands for Ashjian to resign. In response, Ashjian insulted Mays on Twitter and local radio, and doxed her on social media. Immediately after, Mays and her family were the targets of trolling filled with lies and threats. She feared for her physical safety and her family’s. Concerned about threats, she became wary when covering events and opening emails. Eventually, managing editor Joe Kieta took her off the education beat and assigned her to do investigative stories. Mays was the subject of fresh attacks after she reported about drug use and prostitution in a boat cruise sponsored by a winery partly owned by Republican Representative Devin Nunes. Nunes disparaged Mays in his 38-page diatribe against *The Fresno Bee*, a mailer sent to his constituents (Nunes also filed a defamation suit against the newspaper). Trolls targeted Mays online and by voicemails (Baron 2018). In January 2019, Mays quitted the *Bee* to join *Politico*’s California bureau, and received an award from the National Press Club for her work.

This example is just one among scores of recent cases of trolling against journalists in the United States and around the world. Globally, reporters continue to face a constant barrage of online attacks (Costa-Kostritsky 2019). Trolls generally abuse journalists through email and social media messaging. It disproportionately targets female (Koirala 2020; Martin 2018; Mong 2019; Rego 2018; Westcott 2019), non-white reporters (Gardiner 2018), as well as journalists identified with religious minorities (Crary 2018). According to a study by the International Women's Media Foundation, online harassment has become the main safety concern for female journalists (Ferrier 2018). Anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies describe a host of negative consequences of online intimidation (Elks 2018; Reporters without Borders 2018; Thielman 2020; Wolfe 2019). Journalists fear that covering certain people and subjects might attract trolls, and they report cases of self-censorship and personal trauma. They are generally reluctant to disclose and cover attacks out of fear of enraging trolls as well as the potential "Streisand effect" of amplifying incidents. The consequences of online harassment have been particularly damaging in cases of doxing (the malicious publication of private information) and swatting (coordinated prank calls to emergency services to deploy the police to a certain address). *Washington Post* columnist Vargas's (2018) observation that trolling has become "one of the worst parts of the job" captures a widespread sentiment in contemporary newsrooms (Miller and Lewis 2020).

While I recognize that trolling is an ambiguous, fuzzy concept, here I understand it as a range of malicious behaviors that aim to cause trouble, fear, and concern through aggressive and threatening language (Coles and West 2016; Phillips and Milner 2018). Trolls taunt, demean, scare, intimidate, and harm others. Trolling represents a range of disturbing trends in the digital society, such as intolerant speech, hate, and the erosion of personal privacy. Forty percent of the United States population has experienced online harassment (Pew Center 2017), especially young adults and women, through social media, online games, comments section and email. Trolling has become a global threat to human rights (Amnesty International 2018).

While anti-journalist trolling reflects the general phenomenon of online harassment and mob censorship (Waisbord 2020), it needs to be analyzed within particularly developments in journalism and the news industry. Relative ease of public access to newsrooms coupled with the visibility of journalists and news organizations in digital platforms makes journalists vulnerable to trolling. While in some countries trolls are part of state-sponsored persecution of critical and oppositional journalists (Kargar and Rauchfleisch 2019; Pyo 2020), anti-journalism trolling in the United States and other democracies is primarily driven by the politics of social hate and anti-press sentiments mobilized by right-wing populism. In this context, this article sets out to discuss the implications of anti-press trolling for journalism in the contemporary information ecology, and to analyze three blindspots in the way journalism studies has approached the nexus between journalism and publicity.

The twofold push to make newsrooms more accessible to the public through various forms of "audience engagement" (Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, and Peters 2020) and to raise the visibility of journalists and their work in social media and legacy platforms has made journalists frequent targets of trolling. The decisions by news companies to elevate the public profile of journalists and to encourage public engagement with newsrooms has been guided by a mix of considerations – from encouraging audience

participation to marketing news. Until recently, journalism scholarship has generally offered a one-sided, largely optimistic vision about these matters (Gillmor 2004; Haas and Steiner 2006; Merritt 1998). From a perspective that praises openness and participation as democratic ideals, and criticizes journalism's professional culture, it has tended to lionize public engagement with journalism (Barry and Doherty 2017; Karlsson 2011; Rosen 1996). The underlying assumption has been that interactivity between newsrooms and publics would produce news focused on the concerns and the voices of ordinary citizens. No doubt, numerous cases suggest that the gradual opening of newsrooms and journalists to the public has had positive consequences (Schmidt and Lawrence 2020). However, making journalists more accessible and visible has also brought negative outcomes. Recent studies have called attention to the negative consequences of audience engagement (Quandt 2018; Westlund and Ekström 2018).

In line with the latter argument, I argue that anti-journalism trolling makes it necessary to reassess the consequences of public access to newsrooms and journalists' visibility. Trolling reflects the ambivalent results of digital publicity in the context of abundant public expression, surging hate, and press-bashing by reactionary politics. It is necessary for journalism scholarship to reckon with the mixed consequences of public engagement in/of journalism and to revisit arguments about the interactivity between journalism and the public. Here I advance a proposal to take a theoretical perspective that embraces a nuanced understanding of publics and participation, that views "the public" in a range of possible forms (from civic-minded to intolerant), confronts the fact that interactivity and visibility have different effects on journalists depending on social identities and news beats, and addresses the significance of contextual politics on journalism's relationship with the public.

## Publicity in/of journalism

For the past decades, different understandings of publicity have shaped the decisions of news organizations to make newsrooms more accessible and to raise the public profile of journalists. A classic concept in the social sciences and the humanities, publicity has been interpreted in multiple ways. Following Dean (2001), I understand publicity as the organizing element of democratic politics and the golden ring of the infotainment society. It is linked to canonical notions in democratic theory, such as public opinion, the public's right to know, the public use of reason, and the critical scrutiny of power, as well as to forms of display and presentation of the self and collective actors to bring attention and recognition.

In media and journalism studies, publicity has been associated with two lines of inquiry (Dahlberg 2018). On the one hand, one interpretation espouses publicity in terms of the public use of reason, expression, scrutiny of power, deliberation, and participation (Splichal 2002). Grounded in Habermasian arguments about ideal speech, this position understands publicity as constitutive of the public sphere understood in terms of the spaces and abilities of citizens to engage in public criticism. Publicity demands the existence of institutional mechanisms to foster individual and collective engagement. On the other hand, a different approach identifies publicity with the promotion of particular interests, generally aligned with powerful actors. This notion has infused the vision and the practice of a range of strategies, such as propaganda, marketing, public relations, and advertising.

These tactics have been designed to persuade publics through deliberately biased, self-interested, and/or deceptive information (Cronin 2018; for a dissident view on public relations, see Sommerfeldt 2013). Whereas the former position identifies publicity with citizenship, argumentation, and participation in pursuit of common goods such as justice and democracy, the latter espouses publicity as a set of informational actions to booster sectorial interests.

Understanding publicity in terms of public engagement as a form of active citizenship has occupied in central position in journalism scholarship for the past decades. It has been at the core of the literature on journalism and citizenship, commonly identified in the United States with the groundbreaking work of Carey (2008), which emphasizes the intertwined relation between the press, the public and democracy. If journalism only makes sense in relation with the public, as Carey argued, then it needs to effectively work as an institution for deliberation and expression of public voices and demands. This perspective has also been central to the “public journalism” movement in the 1990s in the United States (Glasser 1999), which made a rousing call to journalism to open up and include the public in different capacities to produce news that are intertwined with citizens’ lives and concerns. The movement criticized mainstream journalism for having severed its relationship with citizens. It urged journalism to involve citizens and communities in newsrooms’ decision-making process. It exhorted newsrooms to put communities and public interests at the center of the news process. Inspired by these ideas and with funding from philanthropic foundations, several news organizations conducted experiments in public journalism. Despite initial enthusiasm, the record is mixed, at best; many experiments had limited impact and the “public journalism” movement failed to overturn longstanding practices and professional norms in newsrooms (Friedland 2003).

However, for the past two decades, this vision arguably had a lasting effect in the news industry, as it inspired participatory experiments in audience engagement in specific aspects of news production, distribution, and consumption (Ferrucci, Nelson, and Davis 2020). At a time of growing concerns about low public trust in the press, scholars and industry managers believed that opening and engaging with citizens would have beneficial consequences not only for bringing news organizations close to the public, but also for democracy. The situation was ripe with opportunities for citizen-oriented innovations that tapped into the interactive affordances of digital technologies.

Eventually, the language of participation lost much of its democratic grounding and resonance. Aspirations to shake up news epistemologies in mainstream journalism by “bringing citizens into” central positions in news-making mutated into the blander buzzwords of “audience interactivity” and “audience engagement.” Although some scholars (Min 2020) argue that “public engagement” is an offspring of the public journalism movement, the kind of engagement favored by news organizations has been remarkably different from the ambitious, radical epistemological revolution in mainstream journalism that many had hoped for. The gap between normative aspirations and actual practices is evident. Fundamentals procedures, the norms of professional journalism, and the loci of news-decision power remained largely unchanged (Engelke 2019; Singer, Hermida, and Domingo 2011; Waisbord 2013).

While news-making remained firmly anchored in traditional bureaucratic processes and norms, news organizations rolled out interactive mechanisms and encouraged audience participation. The “turn to the public” was partial as it incorporated citizens in limited

roles, such as sources of tips and eyewitness videos, participants in comments sections, and conveyor belts of news stories in the process of news distribution, sharing, and consumption. These innovations were hardly the kind of radical forms of journalism that public journalism advocates had envisioned (Usher 2017). Citizens did not become central actors in decision-making processes. Instead, they were asked to participate in processes essentially controlled by professional journalists. The old, unidirectional gatekeeping model was not upended; rather, it was left untouched as news organizations were eager to promote audience engagement to establish closer relations with audiences, to strengthen reach and usage, and to know audience beliefs and sentiments about news content.

This understanding of audience engagement became part of the arsenal of the promotional approach to publicity in news industries. This approach was also reflected in the drive to elevate the public profile of news organizations and journalists to strengthen so-called news brands in the digital society. Given persistent economic difficulties of the news industry and decades-long challenges to bring and retain audiences and subscribers, especially in the newspaper industry, news organizations embraced a marketing mindset that championed a non-political conception of audience engagement. The goal was to cultivate a closer relationship with news consumers with the hope that it would strengthen market presence and yield economic benefits. The rationale was hardly the kind of dialogic, participatory model at the core of public journalism. Instead, it intended to build identity and loyalty among audiences through instrumental strategies embedded in marketing principles. Raising brand recognition in digital environments demanded more than conventional advertising and outreach tactics historically favored by news companies. News branding has been a multifaceted endeavor. It was deemed important for various reasons: to make readers aware about original sources, to cultivate loyalty, and hopefully, to make them pay for news. As an example of “measurable journalism” (Carlson 2018), it has been primarily concerned with data metrics and traffic rather than with overturning hierarchies in news-making and putting citizens at the center of news decision-making.

News organizations embraced audience engagement for the same reasons they resorted to other tactics to bring and keep readers in their sites. Newsrooms utilized digital platforms to encourage readers to provide feedback, suggestions, and comments (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2012). Measurements generally focus on the behaviors of audiences as news consumers rather than on citizens’ dialogue and empowerment. Indicators measure audience clicks, time spent on individual stories, navigation patterns and other behaviors. Data-driven “best practices” guidelines shared with reporters are primarily concerned with making audiences bigger. Dominant interest in news reception/use rather than news production (Nelson 2019) reflect a prevalent top-down approach to audience engagement rather than the horizontal model championed by public journalism.

The current reality suggests the triumph of the instrumental, consumerist view of public engagement that did not unsettle the traditional division of newswork and decision-making processes (Schmidt, Nelson, and Lawrence 2020). Peters and Witschge (2015) perceptively argue that experiments in audience engagement have prioritized individualistic rather than collective approaches to participation driven by commercial goals to maximize “personal” experiences. Citizens have been primarily conceived as audiences rather than as political actors. Such outcome should not be surprising given the weight of traditional concerns especially among news business and the commercial nature of the news

industry. In summary, although a mix of professional and business motivations originally pushed news organizations to engage audiences, a market logic eventually prevailed (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc 2018).

### **Making journalism public**

News organizations have tried to “make journalism public” through several strategies. Comment sections has been one of the most visible and better-studied forms of audience engagement. News organizations originally hoped that active participation through posting comments on news stories would result in stronger audience identification with their websites and corporate brands. The body of evidence is mixed. Some studies have concluded that, despite their marketing origins, certain cases suggest that audience comments have made valuable contributions to news knowledge and public debate. Audience engagement shows some positive contributions in terms of citizens’ deliberation, knowledge, and creativity (Bergström and Wadbring 2015). Citizens supplement reporting with important information, provide knowledgeable contributions, engage in civil debate, and challenge dominant news frames and the selection of sources and stories. Although participation rarely meets the high bar of Habermasian dialogic communication, comments have other positive contributions such as adding valuable information to public debates and building discursive skills.

In contrast, other studies have reached more pessimistic conclusions given that audience comments are frequently filled with vitriol, coarse language, racism, misogyny, and conspiracy theories (Naab et al. 2020). Comments sections were not exactly opportunities for reasoned conversations or apolitical branding. They also reproduced general gender disparities in news online participation (Van Duyn, Peacock, and Stroud 2019). In many cases, sections are used to harass journalists (Coles and West 2016; Wright, Jackson, and Graham 2020) which, among other reasons, make journalists less interested in engaging actively with audiences. Concerned about the reputational damage brought about by hosting toxic content, news organizations opted to control participation tightly by moderating audience postings, deleting offensive content, disabling comments on specific stories that would likely attract hateful expression, and shutting down comments sections. In summary, audience engagement turned out to be a bumpier, messier, more unpredictable endeavor that originally expected. It has not been the positive, participatory revolution that many had imagined (Karlsson, Bergström, and Clerwall 2015).

Simultaneously, online communication offered several opportunities for affirming the public presence of news organizations and for inviting public participation, especially as digital platforms and social media became common ways through which the public consumes news. Journalists’ email addresses and information contact on social media were made publicly available. Reporters are encouraged to have an active presence on social media to promote stories, raise their own professional profile, and bolster the reputation of their employers (Tandoc and Vos 2016). Just as self-branding became deemed a necessity for reporters (Hedman 2020), news organizations embraced social media to build trust. The expectation was that it would produce stronger audience loyalty, more and frequent usage, and higher subscription numbers. The embrace of social media for marketing news took place amid early misgivings in the news industry about the negative impact of social media on news traffic and advertising. Social media corporations take the lion’s share of

online advertising, and social media traffic dilutes brand recognition. Yet given the dominant position of social media in Internet use, news organizations eventually accepted the Faustian bargain of making their content available on social platforms to drive traffic and advertising to their sites.

Actions to raise the profile of news organizations and journalists in social media have been pulled in different directions (Brems et al. 2017). Corporate guidelines generally leave plenty of gray areas about proper online behavior, which magnify underlying tensions in contemporary journalism - tensions between personal and professional considerations, individual speech and organizational guidelines, and free expression and institutional reputation. Distinctive voices, filled with personal insights, humor, and irony work well on social media, but they upend newsroom expectations, about detachment, restraint, and neutrality as in the case of mainstream journalism in the United States (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019). Tensions occasionally burst open as in the case of public furor following “controversial” comments made by reporters on social media. Not surprisingly, postings that reflects personal views and individual sensibilities, sparked controversies and caused headaches among editors and executives, even if they followed conventional journalistic norms of facticity. When dozens or hundreds of reporters carry the banner of news brands, it is harder to control tightly the corporate message. News branding does not flow in a centralized, unified, consistent direction, as news organizations speak constantly and loudly through multiple messengers on several media.

By elevating the public profile of journalists and stories, news organizations made journalists more accessible and visible across media platforms. If the public is defined by the capacity to be seen and heard, as Arendt (2013) argued, journalists are not like most members of the public. Unlike ordinary citizens, many journalists have a towering presence in the mediated sphere amid the constant battle for public attention and deep asymmetries in public visibility. They occupy a different position that allows them to present and to express ideas in front of large publics. This is especially so if they work for news organizations that have a dominant presence in terms of audience/readership and social media following and influence. Considering the public sphere as “spaces of appearances” (Adut 2018), it is unquestionable that leading news companies regularly command significant attention in online and offline spaces where people and ideas appear. Collectively, journalists are more watched, listened to, read, followed, talked to, and shouted than most ordinary citizens. Their reporting, opinions and reactions can quickly become the subject of media coverage and public attention. Virtually any reporter can build a modest social media audience; some even gain Twitter status as “public figures” given their numbers of followers.

In the digital society, public attention and recognition are no longer attributes of selected group of journalists *qua* celebrities, notably television anchors, star correspondents, and on-camera reporters. Even print journalists, who had largely remained away from the public glare in the past, have been able to gain visibility on social media. By constantly pushing out stories in social media and other media platforms to large audiences, journalists have moved closer to the status of “public people”. “Public people” here refers to those who by virtue of their social position occupy a conspicuous position in public life – whether they are prominent members of governments, corporations, social leaders, activists, and celebrities.



Frequent exposure on social media and legacy media turns journalists into salient examples of contemporary “known citizens” (Igo 2018), whose thoughts and lives can be tracked with relative ease by many actors – governments, corporations, and citizens. With more publicity comes higher risk of surveillance, invasion of privacy, and defamation. Like other public people, journalists are more prone to be targets of vicious attacks simply because they are prominent and easy to identify and contact. Personal and professional reputation is constantly on display and at risk for people like journalists for whom visibility is intrinsic to their jobs. In the porous, dynamic structured of mediated visibility in digital societies, reputation is a fluid, volatile good (Rosamond 2019). Just as they can display their work and ideas publicly, journalists are also more likely to be scrutinized by publics motivated by various reasons - accountability, curiosity, or spectacle. Furthermore, heightened visibility also facilitates digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017). Digital vigilantism refers to toxic actions such as harassment, naming and shaming, and doxing by citizens who want to retaliate against others. Publicity, as the special status of “public people,” can turn into unwanted attention as when the public controls, censures, and attacks journalists for their work or, simply, because of who they are.

Trolling against journalists needs to be understood in the context of changing conditions of publicity and the heightened visibility of journalists in the digital society. It reveals the double-edge nature of digital publicity for journalists.

Publicity may bring significant rewards in an industry where peer and public recognition are critical, but it may also imperil professional reputation and personal well-being. It is essential for prestige and corporate branding. It is central to the symbolic capital of individual reporters, the kind of capital that translates into influence, power, career opportunities, and money. Publicity also makes journalists more accessible to tips, documents, and sources. Yet publicity may also attract vicious forms of participation unconcerned with democratic criticism and deliberation. For journalists, public visibility may bring professional recognition and productive forms of audience engagement, but it also facilitates verbal and physical violence from the public. Posting contact information and becoming visible on social media does not necessarily result in virtuous interactivity.

Journalists are prime targets of trolling, like politicians, celebrities, and high-profile activists for the simple reason that they are “public persons”. Certainly, not all journalists are similarly “public persons” as they decide how public they want to be as they make choices about appearances in various forums. Although publicity is central to journalistic work for obvious reasons, the levels of publicity are not predetermined but are negotiated according to individual desires and institutional expectations.

Reporters’ reactions to trolling illustrate how they negotiate the fluid boundaries of publicity. When trolls pounced, journalists have often chosen to draw firmer lines between public and private. Journalists, too, have taken various actions to manage their online and offline visibility and adopted security technologies to protect themselves (Henrichsen 2020). They block trolls, are more vigilant about their own digital footprints, make themselves harder to locate by the public, and cut down social media use and television appearances. In some cases, threats pushed reporters to move physical residence and have personal bodyguards. Finding ways to be shielded from the public is necessary to protect social and professional identities and to regain a sense of privacy. It is a way to protect mental well-being, to increase physical safety, and to maintain professional reputation.

It is not surprising that news organizations have reconsidered the value of participatory platforms (Krebs and Lischka 2019). News organizations have reacted by implementing several measures to protect journalists and avoid the potential damages from trolls (Wolfgang 2018). They have made it more difficult for the public to have direct access to reporters by email or by phone.

As a form of expression animated by social phobias, trolling reveals the potential damaging consequences of digital publicity for journalists. It demonstrates the mixed consequences of leveled opportunities for public expression and visibility. Just as it has positive effects in terms of accessibility to newsrooms as well as being exposed to opinions from other citizens, it also has devastating consequences for personal wellbeing and professional reputation. Trolls intend to have chilling effects on reporters. They aim to intimidate journalists, push them to withdraw from public spaces, and hold back on personal views and professional work on social media. Trolling is public access gone awry - anti-social behavior without regard for privacy, tolerance, and empathy. It exposes the increased vulnerability of journalists to hate in the digital society.

### Three blindspots

The trolling of journalists reveals three blindspots in the way journalism studies has generally approached the nexus between journalism and publicity: an aspirational view of the public as civic-oriented, the unequal impact of digital publicity on journalists according to their social identities, and the influence of political context. Altogether, these issues suggest that it would be misguided to continue to hold aspirational views of audience engagement or assume that publicity has necessarily positive effects for *all* journalists.

### *Civic-minded and intolerant publics*

Theoretically, arguments for audience engagement and participation in journalism have generally espoused an optimistic view of the public as civic-minded and potentially inclined to reasoned dialogue. They envision journalism as convener of public discussion and participation that foregrounds citizens' voices. They recommend a set of communicative practices such as deliberation, argumentation, and consultation to make news citizen-centered and dialogic. This has been the *grand recit* of public journalism and its normative offshoots.

One problem is that this vision is premised on a limited interpretation of the "good citizen" (Schudson 1999) that fails to consider multiple forms of citizenship. It is a normative vision grounded in an ideal model that sidelines the complex histories of publics as well as their attitudes, sentiments, and practices. It conflates the desire for a virtuous public with the actual historical record of citizenship. Just as it features moments of virtuous citizenship, history is also full of example of publics who behave in ways that fall short from deliberative, hyper-rational models (Warner 1992). Consider the cases of mobs who actively oppose listening, understanding, other-orientedness and other dialogic dispositions, and are driven by anger, fear, and hate (Waisbord 2020). Just to state what history copiously demonstrates: Publics come in different forms and shapes, driven by different kinds of dispositions and interests. While some publics have been inspired by passionate politics that culminated in revolutions and massacre, others sparked the

downfall of dictatorships. While some publics actively resisted tyranny, others actively campaigned for authoritarianism. While some publics espoused deliberation and dialogue, others supported intolerance and persecution.

A fundamentally simplistic notion of the public explains the failure to consider the possible negative outcomes of the decision by news organizations to invite audience participation. Trolling reflects the fact that interactive news platforms are catalysts for a wide range of publics – from civic-minded to intolerant. This may be rather obvious today as societies and the commentariat seemingly woke up from the techno-dream that digital technologies would only bring virtuous forms of citizenship, and realized that Internet brims with hate and anti-democratic behaviors. However, the literature has only recently recognized and addressed the possibility that audience engagement would result in mean-spirited forms of participation, detached from civility, reason, compassion, and tolerance. Just as platforms facilitate participation that make news more diverse and bring out multiple perspectives, they also serve as conduits for intolerant, hateful expression.

Journalism can serve as a platform for publics with quite different intentions. Publics do not only challenge dominant news frames and supplement valuable information; they also taunt and threaten journalists. As previously discussed, comments sections are platforms for homophobic, racist and misogynist insults common in right-wing discourse. Insults and threats are legitimate forms of expression contemplated by the inalienable right to free speech. Trolling is defended as patriotic behavior to call on traitors-cum-journalists and to speak truth to power. Right-wing media commentators and publics scoff at reporters who supposedly cannot withstand a verbal beating by calling them “snowflakes” (Hess 2017; McCarthy 2017). When journalists respond to taunts and provocations, trolls double down with attacks and smears because “they won’t shut up”.

In summary, trolling reflects the fact that encouraging audience engagement and boosting the visibility of journalists is potentially fraught with problems. Engagement and public visibility are unstable and unpredictable insofar as they make it possible for publics to express their views about and to journalists in multiple ways. Trolling illustrates that audience engagement brings in a range of actions guided by various principles. Nor does it necessarily feature the kind of apolitical, pleasant chat that peddlers of news branding had hoped for. The fact that reporters refuse to engage with audiences out of concern for their safety and mental well-being, and the decision by news companies to make it more difficult for the public to contact reporters directly, are symptomatic of a very different scenario than the one imagined not so long ago.

### ***The social identities of journalists***

Another blindspot is the general lack of consideration of the uneven impact of publicity on journalists according to their public, social identities. The fact that trolling disproportionately affects journalists according to their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion attest to the unequal effects of elevating the public profile of journalists (Gambino 2016). Making journalists “public persons” does not have the same consequences and risks for all journalists.

In the United States, for example, anti-press trolls tend to be white males who consistently direct their insults and threats to journalists simply because they hate who

they are and represent (Gorman 2019; Graham 2019). Trolling is a reaction against the visibility of “others” (Sobieraj 2018). Trolling is another expression of the long history of fearing and censoring non-white, non-Christian, non-straight male populations. It represents another chapter in the history of hate movements against subjugated actors. For marginalized actors, public visibility has historically been central to becoming citizens with the right to speak and to be recognized. Haters of the past have violently reacted against demands for public voice of women, persons of color and other groups. They found their presence disruptive and threatening. This explains why trolls particularly go after specific groups of journalists based on their perceived social identity. Identity is simply determined by appearances. Reporters who appear stereotypically non-white, female, Arab, Muslim, Jewish or non-straight, based on their bylines and photographs showing skin color and clothing, are targets. Those features are identity shortcuts. Attributed identity does not result from nuanced understandings of people’s sense of self. It is predicated on visible social markers that are taken as representative of specific identities.

Trolls also believe that beats reflect the politics of journalists and newsrooms (Waisbord 2020). Covering gun violence/control, corruption, sexual assault, white supremacy, structural racism, police violence, immigration, and other social issues is not a neutral choice. Whether reporters observe professional notions of facticity, consult, and cite multiple sources, and produce evenhanded stories is irrelevant. Trolls do not seem to be particularly interested in whether journalists strive to be impartial purveyors of balanced news. Instead, they assume that reporters cover those issues because they hold liberal/progressive positions on those issues. They assume that journalists and news organizations are unrepentant lefties who cover those issues because they are against gun rights, white supremacy, sexual assault, or police violence.

Trolling confirms that the social identity of journalists is hugely important for understanding publicity in/of journalism. The decision to open up newsrooms to the public has impacted journalists differently. Public beliefs about who they are affects their experience with publicity. Whereas heightened publicity may not generally bring negative consequences for the personal wellbeing, safety, and reputation of straight, white, male journalists, it puts other colleagues in a much vulnerable position. Of course, none of this should be surprising considering that the relation between subjugated actors and publicity, in the sense of visibility and the (re)presentation in the public sphere, has been considerably different and exceedingly difficult. The pursuit of visibility bring in unequal risks for journalists.

These issues have not received sufficient scholarly attention. Journalism studies has often discussed “the public” and “journalism” as single, abstract, unified institutions. The “public” has often appeared as a collective actor rather than as a range of differentiated subjects by various forms of social distinction – gender, race, religion, sexuality. Journalism, too, is often discussed in broad terms, without nuanced attention to how publics engage with journalism and the importance of the perceived social identities of journalists. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit abstract understandings of “the public” that fail to recognize the centrality of social differentiation and collective identities (Warner 2002) that shape audience engagement as well as the importance of the social identities of journalists in their public engagement and visibility.

## **Political context**

Trolling brings up another limitation of optimistic arguments about audience engagement and the visibility of journalists: Neither engagement nor visibility are disconnected from political contexts. Trolling painfully shows the ways online harassment is connected to troubling trends in contemporary politics, namely, the ubiquity and the weaponization of anti-press sentiments by populist movements in the United States and elsewhere. Public distrust of the media is remarkably high among citizens with reactionary views (Peck 2019). The belief that the news media is a liberal/left institution hellbent to destroy conservative institutions and values is widespread. Cynical and hateful views of the news media are at the core of right-wing politics. While these ideas have dominated the conservative mindset in recent decades, they have long been a shibboleth of white supremacy movements, woven with racialized and anti-semitic tropes. These sentiments present a significant challenge to journalism (Hafez 2019).

In the contemporary United States, trolling cannot be understood outside the context of right-wing aggressive, offensive rhetoric against “the media” in contemporary politics. It has been central to the rhetoric of President Donald Trump and other right-wing populist leaders (Bulut and Yörük 2017; Tamul et al. 2020) who regularly criticize “the press” with epithets that echo far-right language, legitimize dehumanizing views of journalists, and cue in violent behaviors. Legacy and online right-wing media amplify such discourse and constantly denounce journalists and the news media (Peck 2019). Conspiratorial beliefs that spew hate against reporters are common in right-wing websites amid the recent increase of hate actions (ProPublica 2018). The anti-press discourse of right-wing media personalities and popular conservative bloggers infuses the language of trolls who criticize, taunt, and threaten journalists (Costa-Kostritsky 2019).

In this disturbing political communication environment, it is not surprising that trolls utilize interactive platforms to harass mainstream news media and journalists. Trolling reflects a brew of hyper-partisan politics and hateful attitudes whipped up by cunning political elites and other opinion leaders. It reflects the presence and the activation of dangerous politics, driven by anti-democratic beliefs and the strategic calculations by populist leaders. Consequently, the study of audiences/citizens in journalism and the public visibility of journalists needs to foreground their linkages to surrounding political trends and movements.

## **Rethinking journalism, public and publicity**

Journalism studies needs to confront the three blind spots discussed here and take a more nuanced understanding of the relations among journalism, public and publicity. This is particularly necessary in the context of the reassessment of the roles of citizens in journalism (Wenzel and Nelson 2020) as well as the relations of journalists with social media (Lewis and Molyneux 2018) and digital technology (Tsui and Lee 2019).

Publicity can be a boon or a bane for newsrooms and journalists. It can be an opportunity for the public to interact with newsrooms and a central component of journalists’ professional capital; it can also be the source of troubles and trauma. It is not intrinsically good or bad; it can be empowering or dangerous. Publicity is central for societies to gain knowledge and recognize issues and actors. Publicity is essentially a political act rather than

simply a form of civic-oriented engagement or a marketing tactic. Just as it refers to democratic citizenship, publicity is especially risky for many journalists who are vulnerable because of their public gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, or if they work for news organizations that are constantly pilloried by right-wing political and media elites. When powerful actors demonize the mainstream press and trolls are ready to swoop in, publicity quickly becomes problematic. Understandably, journalists often choose to become less visible to avoid some of its worst consequences. They prioritize personal safety over audience engagement amid relentless hostility. Trolling demonstrates that real-world publicity consists of strategic appearances that demand controlling the fluid boundaries between public and private. This is evident in the way newsrooms control comments section as much as in the tactics that journalists choose to manage public access to their contact information and privacy, as well as their social media activity (Bossio and Holton 2019; Stahel and Schoen 2019; Xia et al. 2020).

This situation raises several questions. How to rethink the public and journalism when newsrooms experience “participation fatigue” (Porlezza 2019), disappointment, and frustration with audience engagement? What if opportunities for public engagement are vehicles for hate rather than reason, facticity, listening, or critical thinking? What if journalists are suspicious of and refuse visibility and self-branding out of fear for their personal wellbeing? Does it put them at a disadvantage in an industry obsessed with self-presentation and corporate marketing? Does digital publicity reproduce professional inequalities for it bring advantages to journalists who are relatively unscathed by trolling, but it has considerably negative effects on other journalists?

Addressing these questions is necessary to revisit aspirational arguments about relations between journalism, public and publicity amid the grim backdrop of contemporary hate politics and anti-press sentiments. It is overdue to explore why and where heart-tugging visions that identified “public engagement” with democratic norms and corporate objectives to cultivate “audience engagement” for purely commercial purposes failed. It is necessary to steer an analytical path that carefully weighs the contributions and the problems of engagement and visibility and avoids falling into idealist, upbeat positions solely driven by normative commitments rather than by an understanding of the complexity of publicity in/of journalism.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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