



Surviving Social Media: Event Report & Discussion

In August 2021 Women in Journalism Scotland (WIJS) held a resilience training event, tailored for those dealing with social media abuse in the workplace.

Importantly, Catriona MacPhee, co-chair of Women in Journalism Scotland emphasised that campaigning against abuse is in no way an admission that abuse should be normalised, but that the event was a way to talk about solutions and advice for dealing with online abuse in reality.

Speakers included:

- Carlyne Mitchell, formerly of South Lanarkshire Council, who is an expert in emergency communications and digital strategy and helped create Scottish Government social media 'warning and informing' guidance
- Charley Gavigan, Mental Health Specialist and Podcaster
- Rachel Weiss, Counsellor, Rowan Consultancy
- Jennifer Jones, Women in Journalism Scotland Committee

Together and alongside WIJS members, they highlighted some **Top Tips** which were roundly felt to be useful, for example:

- Remember you're not alone, find support from groups.
- Prioritise yourself – you don't owe anyone your time or response.
- Ensure privacy settings are maxed out. Have separate private/professional accounts.
- Use humour in responses.
- Boundaries – block and mute. Softblocking can be useful.
- Vast majority of trolling isn't about you but a performative public action.
- Only use social media during work hours.
- Create a "nice" inbox to counter the trolls and negative spaces.
- "Mute" certain terms on Twitter – which means not being triggered by it first thing in the morning!
- Give yourself freedom – come off social media for a week.

Carolyne Mitchell talked pragmatically about how profanity filters on Facebook can block certain words or phrases on an account. She also talked about organisational accounts vs personal accounts, and how best to manage them separately. A key tool she introduced was the American Airforce "Whether to Engage or Not?" protocol which was new to most attendees.

She pointed out that the Malicious Communications Act and Hate Crimes Act can be usefully employed, and in certain circumstances, it can be helpful to call the police to ask if an incident qualifies – as it *can* be breached online. Deciding whether to respond became a topic of conversation for most speakers – responding can of course exacerbate the situation, and instead boundaries on personal information – and recognising one's ego – means not always feeling the need to defend one's position.

Jennifer Jones talked of the Twitter Paradox – women working in the journalism sector need it to succeed, but it can also be the downfall of productivity and mental health. Her experiences of operating “under the radar” before becoming “a character” in certain topics were fascinating.

Charley Gavigan invited us to reimagine women’s resilience, and shift from a “bouncing back” metaphor to recycling damage as useful tools for self-preservation. Importantly she noted that fear is trauma – which is what many women are living with. Therefore, fear at work means being re-traumatised and reopens vulnerabilities. She warned against the word “should” which is so conditional and suggested giving the self-permission to create boundaries, and a safety plan.

Rachel Weiss’s presentation was full of wise words and reframing of narratives. For example, she framed resilience as a tree – which can either bend or break. We’re not defined by what happens to us, but by how we respond. We can control some things and not others.

“Most people are doing the best they can, given what they know and understand, including you. If they knew more and were aware more, they would do things differently.”

– **Louise Hay**

She advised taking a self-compassion break – in the midst of the storm we can use mindful self-compassion to notice how we’re feeling. She also advocated for the *What Went Well Today?* Activity as a way to shift how our brain responds to difficulties.

Key Points for a Theory of Change for Scotland

The burnout/mental health consequences of gendered online harassment for journalists who are required for their job to spend time in hostile spaces means loss of earnings and employment uncertainty. Workplace trauma impacts an individual’s whole life.

Employers have a duty of care towards their employees. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999¹ ensure the health, safety, and welfare at work of employees, including minimising the risk of work-related mental health issues. There are a disproportionate number of freelance journalists who are women; any social media policy should protect and support them too, as more vulnerable than full-time employees, including:

- Standard operating procedures and processes put in place to better protect and support women journalists.
- Space needs to be created within organisations and companies to acknowledge the impact that social media engagement has on women in particular (not ‘normalise’ it).
- Establish support mechanisms and policies.
- Resilience training and internal support groups/mentoring can help.
- Utilise software filters on social media accounts, paid for by employers.
- Comment curation is also an important step toward regulating decentralised platforms.

¹ UNISON Scotland Voluntary & Community Sector Newssheet (2021) Health and safety law and you. UNISON Available at: <https://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/safety/hslaw.html#:~:text=The%20Health%20and%20Safety%20at,activities%20do%20not%20endanger%20others.>

The home-working circumstances necessitated by Covid-19 have also intensified the loneliness felt in dealing with social media: “the management of social media accounts has become an isolated experience too, removing the pool of experience, knowledge, and standards that would otherwise have been readily available”.² The Law Society of Scotland addresses the need for employers to look after remote workers' mental health in particular: “From a legal perspective, if an employer does not do as much as it reasonably can to monitor staff working remotely and take steps to ensure employees are supported, that could give rise to legal claims either for negligence in more extreme cases which result in some form of psychiatric injury, or through the Employment Tribunal should they become unwell.”³

There is an urgent need to assess current legislation and organisational policy in Scotland – some of which may be in place already – to identify best practice for employers to better protect women journalists.

In response to this need, Engender sponsored a postgraduate student internship through collaboration with the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences. She has researched and written a report examining the legislative and policy-based context around the online abuse of women journalists in Scotland. This paper will be published by Engender later in 2022.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT ENGENDER

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

ABOUT GENDER EQUAL MEDIA SCOTLAND

Gender Equal Media Scotland is a coalition of journalists, organisations and academics working to bring about women's equality in Scotland's media. The post of Development Officer is hosted by Engender, Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, on behalf of GEMS.

² Poulter K (2021) Social media harm and an employer's duty of care. International Employment Lawyer Available at: <https://www.internationalemploymentlawyer.com/news/social-media-harm-and-employers-duty-care/>.

³ Phillips C (2020) Looking after remote workers: an employer's duties. Law Society of Scotland Available at: <https://www.lawscot.org.uk/members/journal/issues/vol-65-issue-09/looking-after-remote-workers-an-employers-duties/>.