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COMMENTARY

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Can privacy and foreign affiliations thwart academic research? Empirical challenges in the Indian mediascape

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Collecting data for academic research is often fraught with challenges, but my experience as a Ph.D. candidate attempting to gather (survey) questionnaire responses from women journalists in India, highlighted three particularly formidable obstacles: acute privacy concerns, distrust in my research owing to a foreign university affiliation, and direct hostility from potential respondents. My research study is centered on online harassment of women journalists in India and its repercussion on journalism. The study aims to investigate manifestations of the psycho-emotional toll (including the resilience) that journalists exhibit, women in particular. The topic holds incredible significance considering the vitriolic nature of online harassment, which has witnessed severe proliferation in India, under the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) regime (Ghoshal, 2020; RSF.org, 2024). My research sheds light on the systemic and structural issues of sexism and discrimination within the media sector. It investigates the professional obstacles women journalists encounter, including its embodiments in several forms "every single day," and how these challenges affect their professional and personal lives (See also: Subrahmaniam, 2019).

The research necessitated a survey to assess the magnitude of online harassment, followed by in-depth interviews for deeper insights. Numerous academic studies have explored methodological challenges in qualitative research (Bloch, 2007; Fenton et al., 2001; Stern et al. 2014); nonetheless, I am narrating a personal account of the practical challenges owing to some of the most unfathomable factors as discussed below (See: Mc Gregor, 2007).

In creating my sampling frame for the random sampling, I sought assistance from a media forum with over 1000+ (women journalist) subscribers across India. Since the organization lacks a formal structure, I emailed the group's common address, ensuring all my credentials were included, requesting the contact details (names and e-mail only). My request, however, led to a three-day email debate over privacy and data theft risks.

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Lately, privacy concerns and the proliferation of data misuse have heightened individuals' reluctance to share personal information (Amnesty International, 2023; Fassett & Das, 2018; Srivas & Agarwal, 2021). However, this heightened sensitivity, while understandable, could thwart vital research efforts by limiting access to necessary data, ultimately hindering the advancement of knowledge and solutions across various fields. Additionally, my association with a foreign university sparked skepticism and resistance, reflecting deeper issues of national pride and suspicion of external influence.

Finally, the confrontational reactions I received underscore the personal and professional difficulties researchers face in an environment rife with misinformation and heightened security fears. Despite adhering to stringent ethical guidelines and GDPR data protection laws, my attempts to gather essential data were sometimes met with distrust and hostility. This article delves into these challenges, offering insights into the complex dynamics of data collection in contemporary academic research.

This discussion is further complicated by real-world events, such as the 2018 data breach where the Indian government potentially violated the privacy of over one billion citizens in a disturbing data breach. Moreover, instead of resolving the problem that exposed the private information of over 90% of Indians, the journalists who exposed it were held on criminal charges. The government, later, filed a police complaint against journalist Rachna Khaira and the Tribune of India following their report exposing a severe vulnerability in the Aadhaar database, which allows unauthorized access to personal information of over a billion citizens for a nominal fee (Fassett & Das, 2018). Managed by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), this database contains critical biometric and personal data. Initially denying the breach, UIDAI later accused the journalists of criminal conspiracy, bringing to light the discord between data security concerns and press freedom.

This incident sparked significant backlash from human rights and press freedom organizations, who condemned UIDAI's actions as an attack on investigative journalism. Critics, including Edward Snowden, argued that the journalists should be commended for their work in revealing systemic flaws rather than being investigated (Fassett & Das). This controversy underscores broader issues of governmental transparency and the protection of civil liberties in India, given the country's declining press freedom rankings. Notably, India is ranked 159 out of the 180 nations considered in the 2024 edition of the press freedom index, published by Reporters Without Borders (The Hindu, 2024).

In yet another recent incident, the nonprofit advocacy group Amnesty International reported that several Indian journalists' iPhones were infected with Pegasus spyware, highlighting the broader issue of unlawful surveillance faced by journalists in India (Amnesty International, 2023). The phone numbers of more than 40 Indian journalists were identified on a leaked list of potential surveillance targets. According to The Wire, the forensic analysis confirmed that several of these journalists had been successfully surveilled by an unidentified agency using Pegasus spyware, (Srivas & Agarwal, 2021).

Over the past few years, multiple such incidents have engendered an undue sense of fear among journalists, in particular women. On top of this, the grim reality of

profound press suppression was highlighted by the tragic assassination of journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017. Such incidents not only intensify the fear but also discourage journalists from sharing information that is, paradoxically, readily available online. In fact, the names and, in most cases, the email addresses of many journalists are publicly accessible, as they often choose to share this information alongside their news articles.

Addressing these challenges, therefore, requires transparent communication, adherence to ethical standards, and fostering trust between researchers and respondents. Interestingly, the debate also garnered several supportive voices that endorsed my research endeavor, thus contributing positively to the overall reception of my project.

Reason number one: privacy concerns

Privacy concern was at the forefront of journalists' responses, highlighting a significant unease about data security. The mention of "huge misuse of databases despite safety measures" highlights the fear of personal information being compromised, which is further amplified by the fact that stringent laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) were not seen as a sufficient reassurance. One of the world's toughest privacy and security laws, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was enacted by the European Union (EU) on May 25, 2018. It imposes obligations on organizations targeting or collecting data on EU residents and levies severe fines for violations, with penalties reaching millions of euros (Wolford, 2020).

Several journalists indicated that regardless of the legal protections, individual privacy remains a critical issue, especially in a context where data misuse has been pervasive. Conversely, some women referenced Asia's weaker laws compared to the EU, underscoring India's inadequate data protection measures. This added to the reluctance in sharing personal information (as my site of investigation is India). However, only a few journalists among all, expressed her willingness to help under strict conditions of verified identity and EU protection, which invariably signals the deep-rooted mistrust and apprehension in data handling practices across nations.

Reason number two: distrust in foreign university affiliation

The distrust towards my foreign university affiliation was evident in several e-mail responses. Some questioned whether foreign academic institutions truly follow more stringent ethical rules when compared with Indian universities, suggesting inherent skepticism about Western academia's functioning. Moreover, a senior journalist even cited a recent data breach by University College Dublin. In 2021, the university was fined €70,000, for failing to implement appropriate security measures, storing data longer than necessary, and failing to notify The Irish DPA (DPC) of a personal data breach without undue delay (Brennan, 2021).

Much of the skepticism stemmed from a defensive stance that Indian universities also adhere to strict ethical guidelines. Many seniors cited several Indian universities and broadly, the Global South as being home to rigorous and high-caliber research (with strict directives and protocols) as well, thereby countering the assumption that

rigorous academic standards are unique to the Global North. Adding to the point, others engaged in a nuanced critique of the perception that academic standards abroad are inherently more stringent than India.

While there are salient mechanisms that perpetuate the inequalities in knowledge production between the Global North and Global South, statistics indicate that the headquarters of major publishers, leading scholarly journals, and prominent scientific societies and associations are predominantly located in the Global North. Consequently, research concentration is heavily skewed towards this region (Collyer, 2016). As a result, the amplification of academic research activities leads to the imposition of more rigorous and related laws.

The aforementioned perceptions, influenced by stereotypes about international academic practices, further exacerbate the challenges faced by researchers in gaining the trust of native and local respondents, necessitating efforts to bridge the gap in perceptions and build credibility.

Reason number three: direct hostility from potential respondents

Several potential respondents demonstrated direct opposition, reflecting an adversarial tone, which can be intensely demoralizing and counterproductive. Finally, by the end of the third day, one senior journalist's request for detailed clarification on the data specifics turned out to be a reassuring indication that the significance of my research was being acknowledged by many. Notably, a reference to "diploma disease" implied a dismissive attitude towards academic pursuits, especially from a foreign institution, further highlighting the direct hostility. The concept of "diploma disease" was popularized by the sociologist Ronald Dore in his book "The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification, and Development," published in 1976. Dore's work critiques how educational systems worldwide have become overly focused on certification, often driven by social and economic pressures. Such resentment might have originated from deep-seated patriotism and excessive chariness, amplified by the contentious political atmosphere and heightened anxieties over data privacy.

Conclusion

My research request was met with a substantial volume of arguments and counter-arguments over three continuous days of e-mail conversations, which profoundly impacted both my efforts and emotional state. Despite ensuring strict confidentiality, anonymity, and compliance with the necessary academic protocols, the discourse was marked by significant contention. While the privacy concerns raised were indeed valid, the prevalence of snide remarks, particularly influenced by some senior figures' opposition, highlighted a tendency among individuals to engage in harmful or defamatory communication when not conducted face-to-face. Ironically, this behavior aligns with the broader focus of my research, which examines how anonymity in online communication facilitates trolling, a phenomenon corroborated by numerous global studies.

Most strikingly, several journalists reached out to me privately, expressing their regret for the ordeal I endured over those few continuous days of discussion. Not

only did they extend their moral support but also conveyed willingness to participate in my research. This private backing not only provided a much-needed reassurance amidst the public contention, but also underscored a critical aspect of my findings: the dichotomy between public discourse and private agreement. These interactions shed light on the complexities of online communication dynamics, where public forums can become arenas for resentment and posturing, while private communications reveal solidarity and support. This duality is a testament to the nuanced nature of online interactions and the potential for underlying empathy and cooperation, even in contentious environments. Also, this experience reflects broader challenges in academic research, particularly in sensitive fields. I ultimately resorted to alternate methodologies, specifically, random sampling for an unknown population to advance my data collection. Such experiences highlight the critical importance of adaptability and resilience in research, demonstrating how researchers must be prepared to pivot and find innovative solutions when faced with unexpected obstacles and resistance.

Ethical approval

In this commentary, I discuss the challenges and resistance encountered during data collection for my research. All observations are presented in a manner that ensures the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. No names or identifiable information are included, and the focus is on the general patterns and behaviors observed. The ethical considerations of informed consent and privacy have been strictly adhered to, in line with academic standards and guidelines. The observations discussed herein reflect general experiences and behaviors, ensuring that no individual's privacy or identity is compromised.

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Notes on contributor

Pragyaa Chandel is an experienced media professional with several years of experience in the broadcast and communication industry in India. Currently a final-year doctoral research scholar at Dublin City University (Ireland), her dissertation investigates online harassment of women journalists in India, and her research interests focus on media/journalism; and gender & sexuality studies.

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