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# Reporting on How Feminism and Immigration Triggers Hate Speech in Finland

Social media has made it easier than ever before to target journalists with hateful messages, but the phenomenon itself is not new. In the past, journalists were targeted with hate speech and threats through phone calls and letters. In addition, women journalists have suffered from sexist behaviour of their fellow workers and interviewees. This article takes a brief look at the historical development of hateful behaviour towards women journalists in one Nordic country, Finland.

“Whore”, “fat”, “complaining piece of shit”. These are a few of the comments Saara Huttunen, a feminist blogger in Finland, received after her blog posts during the past few years. Huttunen is not a professional blogger but a philosophy student from the University of Jyväskylä. Still, her texts make some people so enraged that she has been given the title of the most hated person on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Huttunen’s case is symptomatic of present-day online environments: The perpetrators are most commonly men and women who stand out are their targets.<sup>2</sup>

When media consumers have found their digital voice in various social media sites, threats and hateful messages have also become an everyday manner of reacting to news and the journalists behind it. In this text, I will focus on Finnish women journalists and take a historical look at their treatment since the 1960s. The intention is not to give a thorough analysis of the phenomenon in Finland but rather to take a look at specific moments from

different decades and ponder what might connect or differentiate them. The text is connected to my ongoing research project on Finnish and Swedish women journalists’ views of gender equality from the 1960s to the present day and to my previous research on 1960s and 1970s Finnish journalists.

## From sexism to hate speech

Based on oral history, unwanted behaviour towards women journalists has always existed. In the past, it was most commonly sexism and even sexual harassment of women by their colleagues or interviewees that women journalists were forced to face in Finland, similarly as in other countries.<sup>3</sup> Sexism had its peak during the 1960s and 1970s, when the number of women journalists steadily increased in a society in which rules were still formulated by men. Especially men in high positions belittled women journalists who interviewed them and some of them tried to take advantage of their superior position by harassing their interviewees. A magazine journalist who started her career in the 1960s remembered how one interviewee slipped his arm inside her tunic.

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The man explained this by saying that her “breasts looked like they were on offer”.<sup>4</sup>

Hate speech, however, has started to flourish during the past decades, when women journalists have gained a steady foothold in newsrooms and high-profile stories, and personalized columns, as well, have made them more visible to media consumers. According to Australian journalist and media scholar Emma Alice Jane,<sup>5</sup> “gendered vitriol is proliferating in the cybersphere; so much so that issuing graphic rape and death threats has become a standard discursive move online, particularly when Internet users wish to register their disagreement with and/or disapproval of women.” Also in Finland, hate speech has escalated during the past few years, although threats or hateful behaviour toward Finnish women journalists are not a new phenomenon. The data is in line with Jane’s<sup>6</sup> conclusion that hateful messages are a broader social issue in the continuum in which women have been seen as inferior to men throughout history.

At this point, it is important to note that male journalists who have behaved against the grain have also received negative and even hateful feedback. In 1960s and 1970s Finland, television and radio journalist Hannu Taa­nila was crowned the most irritating person in Finland.<sup>7</sup> Thus, one can conclude that the historical context shapes the forms of unwanted and hateful behaviour toward women as well as toward male journalists. Furthermore, hate speech or threats can be defined as one form of political pressure through which the intent is to threaten the targeted person into silence and stop them from covering certain topics. Although Finland is still the model country when measuring the freedom of press,<sup>8</sup> some journalists self-censor certain topics,<sup>9</sup> which extends the consequences of hate speech from individuals to the freedom of speech.

### From offline to online threats

Journalists have always received critical feedback from media consumers and the objects of their news reports – whether they have been a person or a company or institution (says interviewees). Hate speech differs considerably

from these kinds of occupational risks. Based on the interviewed journalists, it is something that targets a specific person and is clearly aggressive in nature. It is often recurrent and may include death threats, be abusive or contain a material object that can be interpreted as insulting. In addition, journalists are forced to deal with hate speech toward other groups of people, such as immigrants or politicians, when moderating discussions on their Internet sites. A middle manager in a regional newspaper commented on this as follows:

Nowadays, the Internet brings hate closer to us journalists all the time. Sometimes when I am moderating internet discussions late at night I feel great anxiety because of all that hate that comes from there. [...] One night, after I had removed quite many texts which were hateful towards asylum seekers, a message was sent that read: “a person should know the schedule of the newsroom to know who it is that is limiting the freedom of speech”. Although the one who wrote did not know who I was, the message caused me a nasty feeling that someone out there is thinking of me in a very malignant and disgusting manner.

In the past, threats or hateful feedback were given by phone or in letters (interviewees). It can be assumed that these forms needed more effort than the use of Internet, in which messages can be sent anonymously and can reach the source directly. In Finland, year 2007 was a watershed, after which the use of social media, as well as different forms of blogs, has increased rapidly.<sup>10</sup> They have been flourishing grounds for hate speech.

Based on oral histories, hate speech seems to have always been connected to media texts and often triggered by a topic that divided opinions or was written in a manner that exaggerated stereotypical images. An interviewee who worked in a big newspaper explained how her critical news report on pensioners caused a storm of hateful responses from retirees in the 1980s. The feedback included death threats and material elements, such as used toilet paper. The example clearly shows

that angry young men are not the only ones to send hateful messages – although that is the group in which hate speech perpetrators are most commonly identified – but they can come from young or old, men or women.

Furthermore, it seems that some themes are more igneous than others. Based on longitudinal study, it is evident that reporting on gender equality issues or feminism has been and still is a trigger that most definitely causes hateful responses, particularly if the journalist in question has chosen women's issues as a special field to cover (interviewees). The feminist stamp is also something that seems to be hard to avoid, even when a story in question does not specifically deal with feminism or gender equality. A journalist who started her career in the late 1990s remembered an e-mail in which she had been called a “wide-ass feminist cow” that should move to the Middle East. This particular feedback came to the newsroom after she had written a news report of the low wages of nurses (interviewee). Others reported similar responses, as well.

The hot spot of feminism becomes evident also when taking a glance at columns in which journalists or regular columnists have written about the responses they have received. Earlier this year, Finnish film director and screenwriter Saara Cantell<sup>11</sup> commented on the feedback she has received based on her radio columns as follows:

I have been told that I write feminist bullshit [...]. In addition to my columns, my persona has been evaluated. It has been defined as small minded, small souled and narcissistic such as I [...] demanded to be treated like a princess. You [perpetrators] have also pointed out that I am not right in anything and my columns can only work as masturbation material for some feminists.

In addition to feminism, immigration and ethnicity in general are topics that cause anxiety among media consumers. Although reporting on the status of people from different ethnical backgrounds may have caused hateful messages, at least since the 1980s, it has become more evident, especially during the

past few years. Hate speech may also be connected to old and long-lived conflicts, such as conflicted relations between Finland and Sweden. In 2013, a group of Swedish-speaking journalists in Finland were threatened, due to their mother tongue. The dispute started after a document film about the common history of Finnish and Swedish was aired on public television. After journalists in question publicly spoke about these messages, hateful messages were also sent to those who supported them and demanded an end to hate speech.<sup>12</sup> Emma Jane has reported similar consequences. According to her,<sup>13</sup> women who speak publicly about the hate messages they have received often end up receiving more of them.

Due to the ethnical homogeneity of Finnish journalistic workforce, journalists themselves are rarely from diverse ethnic backgrounds. However, the situation may change in the future, when Finnish journalists become ethnically more heterogeneous. It has come to my attention that a journalist who is not ethnically Finnish has already been confronted with racist attacks.<sup>14</sup> These particular hate messages were inspired by a social media update of a representative of the far right political party, True Finns. The incident supports a conclusion made by Pöyhtäri et al.<sup>15</sup> According to them, the current political climate in which True Finns, with their populist agenda, has entered the public discussion is one reason for the more aggressive speech culture in Finland. Additionally, economic depression and future prospects are argued to have led to more aggressive online behaviour.

### **Finland among other countries**

What about journalists who receive threats or hateful messages? A Swedish study conducted in 2013 revealed that men journalists were threatened a little bit more often than women journalists. Instead of gender, the reason for the difference lay in the division of work, the researchers concluded. Men's threats also included more violence, whereas women were threatened sexually more often: 31 percent of women journalists who had been targeted with hateful feedback had received them in

the form of sexually threatening comments.<sup>16</sup> A more recent study conducted by a think tank called Demos in the United Kingdom had different results. Based on their Twitter analysis, women journalists were the only group of public figures who received a higher amount of abuse than their male counterparts. Along with male politicians, female journalists were the ones who were most likely to suffer from Twitter attacks.<sup>17</sup>

The proportion of Finnish women and men journalists who are targeted with hateful messages is still unclear, however, a study conducted in 2012-2013 revealed that, similar to their Swedish colleagues, Finnish women journalists have been targeted with sexual references, name calling and violent threats. Although male journalists were also targeted with different kinds of insults, they thought that they were not treated as badly as their female counterparts, due to their gender.<sup>18</sup> It is also evident that hate messages and threats toward journalists are connected to a larger phenomenon. According to Anthony Cortese,<sup>19</sup> hate speech and hate crimes in general have become more and more common in the new millennium. In The United States, this means racist speech and hate crimes toward Muslims and Arabs as well as toward transgender people to name few of the most commonly targeted groups of people. On the other hand, Jane<sup>20</sup> argues that since 2011, women around the world have started to speak publically about hateful messages they have received in electronic form.

## Conclusion

Not all women journalists have been targets of threats or hateful speech (Interviewees). However, in the current media landscape, where boundaries between professional journalism and the blogosphere are becoming more fluid and journalists interact with media consumers through social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook,<sup>21</sup> the probability of women journalists being called “fat whores”, like Saara Huttunen, is higher than ever. The question remains: What can we do? The message from those who have been targeted with hateful behaviour is clear: Supervisors need to take all threats and hateful speech seriously, and no one should be left alone (Interviewees). Many examples can be found on how hateful speeches can be confronted. In 2013, Swedish female journalists, who participated in a programme made by the Swedish public service broadcaster about internet hate, read aloud some of the hateful messages they had been sent. The programme inspired Finnish journalist Johanna Korhonen, who has been targeted with hateful comments for various reasons, to call her harassers.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, a video made by women journalists of The Guardian, in which they read text messages that have been sent, has received over 270,000 views on their Facebook page since June this year.<sup>23</sup> These examples alone show that although social media has given media consumers’ new channels to voice their opinions of journalists and their news reports, it has also become a way for journalists to say: This is enough.

### Facts about the study

Experiences of hate speech and threats have been gathered from 30 Finnish women journalists who have started their careers in different decades between 1960s and present day.

All in all, 63 Finnish women journalists have been interviewed about their experiences of gender equality within their profession.

Hate speech as a theme did not enter discussions in itself but it needed to be asked about directly.

In Finland, discussion of hate speech and threats towards journalists has not focused on women although it has been verified that the targets of internet hate are more often women than men.

## Notes

1. Tiainen, 2014; Hirvasnoro, 2015.
2. Jane, 2014.
3. e.g., Bruin, 2004; Kurvinen, 2013; North, 2009; Ross, 2004; Walsh Childers et al. 1996.
4. Kurvinen, 2013.
5. Jane, 2014: 558.
6. Jane, 2014.
7. Kurvinen, 2013
8. Index for Press Freedom, <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>.
9. Pöyhtäri et al., 2013.
10. Välvirronen, 2011.
11. Cantell, 2015.
12. e.g., Salovaara, 2013a; 2013b; Vihavainen, 2013.
13. Jane, 2014.
14. Suomen Journalistiliitto, 29.7.2015.
15. Pöyhtäri et al., 2013.
16. Löfgren Nilsson, 2013; see also Löfgren Nilsson's text in this issue.
17. Demos, 2014.
18. Pöyhtäri et al., 2013.
19. Cortese, 2006.
20. Jane, 2014.
21. e.g., Hermida, 2009; Lasorsa et al., 2012.
22. Olivia 6/2013.
23. 'You need to be gagged': female writers recount internet abuse, <https://www.facebook.com/theguardian/videos/10153454156216323/?pnref=story>.

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