Facts & Frictions

Emerging Debates, Pedagogies, and Practices in Contemporary Journalism

Faits & frictions

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Cover: Media at York University. Photo by Jovaughn Stephens

From online trolls to positive community connections: Transforming journalism's public interactions to sustain our craft and save our souls

Patricia W. Elliott, Editor-in-Chief

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Was a time when journalists prided themselves on thick skin, harangues against them worn as badges of honour, especially when uttered by the powerful. Then the advent of online commenting raised the stakes from occasional pushback to a steady torrent of verbal abuse and threats of violence, amplified by social media. The emotional toll of false bravado amid vitriol is now more clearly recognized, along with growing demand for journalism school courses and workplace programs intended to safeguard frontline reporters' mental health (Martin & Murrell, 2020; Markovik & Serafimovska, 2023). While efforts thus far may fall short of the task, particularly for women journalists, (Holten et. al, 2024), the problem is now openly acknowledged, and supports are being gradually introduced to Canadian newsrooms. This includes the Canadian Association of Journalists' newly launched online peer support program, which "will offer colleagues a way to reach out, contact helping peers, and get help to work out problems, talk confidentially, and heal" (B. Jolly cited in CAJ, 2025).

However, when academics step onto journalistic online platforms—as they are increasingly expected to do—they step into the troll tarpit with comparably little emotional preparation or workplace support. In this issue's opening article, researchers Sibo Chen, Nicole Blanchett, and S. Lecourt (2025) name it "The Dark Side of Public Visibility" (p. 12). Their article, subtitled "How Academic Authors Perceive and Cope with Online Hostility," places the problem within an environment of surging online toxicity, mob censorship, and demonization of journalists. "As anti-press hostility intensifies globally, its impact on academics, whose presence as authors in journalism-based publications has increased in recent years, presents an understudied subject in communication and media studies literature," they observe (p. 12). They further note that, on top of rampant anti-press hostility, academics are subject to the doubling-down effects of anti-intellectualism. However, little is known about how academics are responding to the pressure. To address this knowledge deficit, the research team surveyed 732 authors published in The Conversation Canada, a journalism-style platform for scholarly work that, adhering to the norms of online journalism, includes a readers' comments function. Articles published by *The Conversation* are also frequently republished by mainstream mass media outlets with wide-reaching web audiences and social media feeds, increasing the public exposure of academic authors. Following the quantitative survey, the research team conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with randomly selected survey respondents. The picture that emerged should concern us all. In the survey and interviews, a significant number of academic authors identified avoiding controversial topics and suppressing their viewpoints as strategies

to deal with online toxicity, "thereby fostering an atmosphere of self-censorship" (p. 27). The team's findings present a strong case for increased institutional attention to the impacts online hate has on non-journalists operating in journalism environments. Further, beyond protection of individuals, the study's conclusion contains a wider call: "This situation underscores the importance of restoring the collective well-being and democratic health of digital platforms" (p. 28).

At the core of this call to action is the question of how journalists can engage with the public in more meaningful, positive ways. As Chen et al. (2025) note, the emergence of reader comments was first welcomed as an opportunity to democratize media and foster community dialogue. History shows this was misguided optimism. Yet the idea of democratic media remains, along with the impulse to seek elevated alternatives to the current online environment, which has ill-served journalists as a primary source of public interaction.

That question of engagement—of working in dialogue with diverse communities to produce relevant journalism—is central to the subject of our next article, "Making it 'Local': Community Data Journalism for Health Justice," by Shirley Roburn (2025). Roburn takes a close look at The Local, a community-embedded nonprofit journalism startup with a social mission, as it tackled one of the most surprisingly controversial news stories of our time, the COVID-19 pandemic. Roburn begins by tracing the historical emergence of digital startups in response to local news deserts created by rapidly vanishing commercial news outlets. Their presence was a candle in dark times, she argues, as new enterprises like The Local aimed to address past media failings through more socially aware and engaged journalism.

Roburn then asks how this model enacts a specific, increasingly prevalent form of journalism: data journalism. In this case, The Local filtered vaccination rates and pharmacy location data through the publication's equity lens, comparing the geography of vaccine delivery to the geography of economic and social inequality in the Peel region. "This disrupted mainstream narratives of collective suffering during the pandemic: clearly, some communities suffered more," Roburn writes (p. 44).

Roburn's research is a follow-up to an earlier study, which examined pandemic-related tweets by The Local's official account and journalists, and the public comments they generated (Chen & Roburn, 2023). Apropos to the premise of our opening article, "The Dark Side of Public Visibility," Roburn found their initial study suffered a lack of women and minority voices, who are less likely to participate in forums like X "due to the disproportionate level of threats, harassment and hate that research demonstrates that these groups face on online platforms." (p. 39). As well, she notes that health officials, who have important perspectives on journalism's impacts, typically don't engage in social media debates. Thus, for the study's second phase, she broadened the methods to include qualitative interviews with journalists, editors, health officials, and health justice advocates, including "racialized people and women who had an overall lower interaction level on Twitter [now X], but substantive public communicative activities through other forums" (p. 39), with the goal of gaining broader perspective on the impact of The Local's data journalism approach.

The study also examined the content of adjacent mainstream media to determine if and how The Local's data journalism shifted the dial of public attention toward vaccine inequity in the Peel region. In interviews, she learned that The Local's Hot Spot Tracker spurred health officials to adopt a targeted strategy to accelerate the rollout of vaccinations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and that The Local's continual data updates became an important performance indicator for this initiative. Interviews with journalists revealed The Local's influence on local and national pandemic reportage. "Many journalists described how The Local's coverage of underserved communities such as Peel, and of marginalized constituencies, such as essential workers, not only impressed them but prompted them to reflect upon how their own journalism could be better," Roburn reports (p. 42). Roburn's quantitative analysis of pandemic news stories in *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* supports the qualitative narratives, particularly in *The Star*'s measurable increase of Peel-focused reporting, while *The Globe and Mail*'s increased framing of COVID in relation to impacts on structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Further, Roburn found The Local's journalists

formed relationships with frontline health care delivery practitioners and decision-makers in the community, in essence working side by side to solve a community problem. As well, their coverage broke the stereotype that disadvantaged people were vaccine-hesitant by showing—through both interviews and hard data—that community members stepped forward for vaccines once barriers, such as pharmacy deserts, were addressed.

While this community-first approach may challenge the traditions of "unbiased" journalism, it helped energize the public to gain improved access to vaccinations, thus serving journalism's core mandate to hold power to account and spark positive social change. "As traditional infrastructures of community news sharing continue to decline, this research offers a kernel of hope that hyperlocal digital community journalism can not only help alleviate 'news deserts,' but can offer a type of journalism that is more relevant and more equitable," Roburn concludes (p. 52).

Similarly, relevance and equity are at the forefront of the peer-reviewed work of journalism presented in this issue, Yumna Iftikhar's (2025) "Voices of the Khwaja sira: Navigating trans rights, religion, and journalism in Pakistan." As an aside, I would like to note to our readers that this journalism work underwent the same double-blind peer review process as the scholarly articles and research notes we publish. Our inclusion of journalistic writing recognizes that major journalism works, while embodying a different form of public expression, employ similar levels of research, interviewing, and ethical considerations as traditionally-recognized academic work, and equally benefit from the input of peers who are experts in both journalism methods and the topic under discussion. This is an important aspect of our editorial mandate and one that, to our knowledge, is unique in the world of academic publishing. (We invite our readers to please inform us if you encounter other academic journals that publish peer-reviewed journalism, as an information exchange with their editors would be useful to our endeavors.)

Returning to the journalism work presented in these pages, Iftikhar's research goal was to explore the Pakistan trans community's reaction to the overthrowing of newly won trans rights by the country's Islamic Shariat Court. Significantly, the location for her research was Multan, a city with a fraction of the population of Pakistan's major urban centres. "While most journalists focus on the trans community from major cities like Karachi and Islamabad, the project focused on trans people whose voices were often left out because of their geography and lack of English skills," she writes in the introduction to the resulting multimedia journalism feature, titled "Trans community fights to protect rights in Pakistan" (p. 56).

For Iftikhar, gaining the trust of this community involved rethinking her role as an interviewer in relation to the interviewees. Arriving in Multan, her initial interviews were one-on-one, during which she, her translator, and her camera crew outnumbered the person being interviewed. Although this was a community story, the bright video lights literally put the spotlight on individuals, not community, to their discomfort. In the article, she describes how a local helper suggested a more relaxed environment, namely bringing members of the trans community together over lunch at a pizza restaurant. Iftikhar observed how the dynamic changed when trans people came together as a bonded network, with her and her team now in the minority position. The concept of 'interviews' was transformed into community dialogue, with the participants more able to express their experiences while supporting one another throughout the conversation.

While this marked a more equitable research method for all involved, Iftikhar was aware it troubled the waters of traditional journalism. In particular, she paid for the pizza and funded participant transportation, something she knew Western journalism editors would likely frown on as being too close to "chequebook journalism." While in the academic world it is normal to provide an honorarium and cover expenses for research participants, Iftikhar notes that professional journalism ethics guidelines typically referenced in Canada would likely interpret the pizza lunch as a financial relationship with potential to muddy the authenticity of information shared with the journalist. Addressing this dilemma, Iftikhar refers to American journalist Nora Neus, who argues that journalists profit unfairly from trauma when they work with marginalized people without offering compensation (Neus, 2023). Iftkhar argues, "Excluding voices because we, as journalists, do

not compensate can result in important voices being omitted from conversations about issues that directly affect them. If I hadn't provided financial support for people to gather, this article wouldn't have included the voices of young transgender people, among others."

Certainly, chequebook journalism at the level of a recently revealed $40 million payment to Melania Trump for participation in a documentary "raises critical questions about editorial control, journalistic integrity, and the blurred lines between political propaganda and documentary storytelling" (Goldhan 2025, para 2). However, Iftikhar's experience provides a strong impetus for journalism educators and ethicists to elucidate a more nuanced framework around the subject of source compensation, filling a deficit in the ethics statements that guide our professional practice.

Iftikhar's decision to situate her research outside the biggest urban centres also highlights the importance of local experiences, whether in Pakistan or Canada. This is a concept well argued by Pauline Dakin (2025) in her commentary "Shots fired: A local news desert leads to lack of crime reporting." When a shooting occurs in Dakin's Halifax neighbourhood, the only evidence that something happened is yellow police tape and, the next day, a sparsely-worded police statement conveyed by local newsrooms, which are too understaffed to dig for more information that could be useful to community safety and well-being. Dakin documents the shrinking number of frontline journalists locally and across Canada, alongside recent research into declining police transparency in Canada. She then illustrates clearly how this plays out at a hyper-local level: "Between tight-lipped police and an apparent lack of interest in or ability to cover the shooting, people who live in the neighbourhood are left wondering whether a shooter is still in the area, and whether police have any leads or concerns for public safety" (p. 76).

Volume 4 Number 2 closes with a review of Christopher Cheung's new work, *Under the White Gaze: Solving the Problem of Race and Representation in Canadian Journalism,* published by UBC Press in 2024. Reviewer Shenaz Kermalli (2025) notes that issues surrounding race and representation have become central to discussions of Canadian journalism, but scholarly works on the topic remain rare. Cheung's work offers a timely and needed intervention, one that calls on us to think more deeply about our collective susceptibility to the totalizing effects of the White gaze, even among BIPOC journalists. "Anyone who reads Cheung's book will likely recognize—and perhaps cringe at—the missteps they've made in their own reporting (myself included)," Kermalli writes (p. 78). However, Kermalli notes that a more significant impact raised by Cheung is his observation that racialized journalists tend to leave the industry, a trend she concurs is a "sobering, painful truth" (p. 78). From Kermalli's review, one may infer hope that introducing *The White Gaze* to journalism students could not only result in fewer cringe-worthy moments, but will lead to a generation of journalists better equipped to challenge—and change—Canadian newsrooms.

Indeed, this is the overall mandate of *Facts & Frictions*, to spark challenges and changes in our field. In closing our work on Volume 4, we embark on the journal's fifth year of publishing, a small but significant milestone. We have managed this journey on the strength of volunteers with a shared mission to both trouble and strengthen journalism's social position, not only as a professional practice but as an academic discipline within post-secondary institutions. Looking back on this issue, I am proud that the content reflects so much of what we stand for as an editorial collective. From the beginning, *Facts & Frictions* has endeavoured to not only publish works of established scholars, but also to offer a welcoming space for emerging scholars and graduate students to receive mentorship and support during their first forays into the world of academic publishing. We have also pushed the envelope of what an academic journal can look like, by including audio and video as forms of scholarly knowledge dissemination, and by inviting works of journalism to undergo peer review. The latter initiative recognizes that much of our scholarly research is delivered via journalism, a powerful means to connect research to a wider public audience of readers, listeners, and viewers. Upholding our editorial statement, drafted through much collegial discussion, we endeavour to serve as a meeting place for colleagues to raise thorny debates, exchange diverse perspectives, and alert one another to new research and teaching resources. We are also Open

Access, devotedly so. I feel this issue of *Facts & Frictions* stands as a well-rounded package of our mission. At this point it feels safe to say that the idea of a Canadian journal dedicated to journalism is now an established, thriving fact.

For me, personally, this marks a fitting moment to step aside and watch *Facts & Frictions* continue its growth under renewed leadership. In July 2024, I officially retired from my professorial work at First Nations University of Canada and now, one year later, I retire as *Facts & Frictions* editor-in-chief, a position I've held since the journal's founding. Taking my place is Carleton University's Trish Audette-Longo, who has been shadowing the position for the past year. Readers may remember Dr. Audette-Longo as the energy behind one of our most successful outputs, the Fall 2023 Special Issue *Forced change: Pandemic Pedagogy and Journalism Education*. In addition to a PhD in communications studies, Dr. Audette-Longo holds frontline experience as a reporter in newsrooms across the country. Her academic research centres the study of inclusive and engaged journalism, an interest that promises to shape her approach to *Facts & Frictions*, inviting and supporting diverse voices to grow and share their scholarship through the journal. This includes initiating research workshops, the first of which she and colleague Dr. Sherry S. Yu delivered on May 22 in connection with the J-Schools Canada annual general meeting. She will also help shepherd a Spring 2026 special issue on engaged journalism, working alongside guest editors Magda Konieczna of Concordia University and Gabriela Perdomo of Mount Royal University. Thus, even before officially taking the helm of *Facts & Frictions*, Dr. Audette-Longo is effectively broadening the journal's world.

For my final words in this editorial space, I wish to convey deep gratitude to our publisher, J-Schools Canada, to our partners at J-Source, and to the growing community of volunteers, peer reviewers, and contributors who have uplifted *Facts & Frictions* from idea to reality. Further, I am deeply grateful to the readers who share articles and cite *Facts & Frictions* contributors, conveying our authors' important work to the world at large. Thank you, one and all!

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Passer des trolls en ligne à des connexions communautaires positives : Transformer les interactions publiques du journalisme pour soutenir notre profession et sauver nos âmes

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Il fut un temps où les journalistes se faisaient un point d'honneur d'avoir la peau dure, les attaques contre eux étant considérées comme des insignes d'honneur, surtout lorsqu'elles étaient proférées par des personnes influentes. Mais l'arrivée des commentaires en ligne a changé la donne : on est passé de quelques critiques ponctuelles à un torrent continu d'insultes et de menaces de violence, amplifié par les réseaux sociaux. Le bilan émotionnel de cette bravade forcée, dans un climat de vitriol constant, est aujourd'hui mieux reconnu. En parallèle, la demande augmente pour des cours en école de journalisme et des programmes en milieu de travail visant à protéger la santé mentale des journalistes de première ligne (Martin & Murrell, 2020 ; Markovik & Serafimovska, 2023). Bien que les efforts déployés jusqu'à présent ne soient pas à la hauteur de la tâche, en particulier pour les femmes journalistes (Holten et. al, 2024), le problème est désormais ouvertement reconnu et des mesures de soutien sont progressivement mises en place dans les salles de presse canadiennes. Il s'agit notamment du nouveau programme en ligne de soutien par les pairs de l'Association canadienne des journalistes, qui « offrira aux collègues un moyen de tendre la main, de contacter des pairs aidants et de recevoir du soutien pour régler des problèmes, parler en toute confidentialité et amorcer un processus de guérison » (B. Jolly, cité dans CAJ, 2025).

Cependant, lorsque des universitaires prennent la parole sur des plateformes journalistiques en ligne —ce qu'on attend de plus en plus d'elles.eux —, elles.ils se retrouvent plongé.e.s dans une véritable fosse aux trolls, souvent sans y être préparé·e·s émotionnellement ni soutenu·e·s adéquatement par leur milieu de travail. Dans l'article d'ouverture de ce numéro, les chercheur·e·s Sibo Chen, Nicole Blanchett et S. Lecourt (2025) nomment ce phénomène "The Dark Side Public Visibility" [« le côté obscur de la visibilité publique »] (p. 12). Leur article, sous-titré "How Academic Authors Perceive and Cope with Online Hostility" [« comment les auteur.es académiques perçoivent et font face à l'hostilité de la presse »] , inscrit le problème dans un contexte de toxicité numérique croissante, de censure collective en ligne et de diabolisation des journalistes.

« Alors que l'hostilité envers la presse s'intensifie à l'échelle mondiale, ses effets sur les universitaires —dont la présence dans les publications de style journalistique s'est accrue ces dernières années —demeurent peu étudiés dans la littérature en communication et études des médias », observent-elles.ils (p. 12). Les auteur.e.s ajoutent qu'en plus de cette hostilité envers la presse, les universitaires sont également confronté·e·s à une vague d'anti-intellectualisme qui accentue encore leur vulnérabilité.

Or, on en sait encore très peu sur la manière dont elles.ils réagissent à ces pressions. Pour combler cette lacune, l'équipe de recherche a mené un sondage auprès de 732 auteur·e·s ayant publié sur The Conversation Canada, une plateforme de

diffusion journalistique d'articles scientifiques qui, suivant les normes du journalisme numérique, inclut une section de commentaires pour les lecteurs. trices. Les articles publiés sur The Conversation sont souvent repris dans les grands médias traditionnels, ce qui accroît la portée en ligne et l'exposition publique des auteur·e·s universitaires. Après cette enquête quantitative, l'équipe a réalisé des entrevues qualitatives approfondies avec un échantillon aléatoire de répondant.e.s.

Ce qui en ressort a de quoi inquiéter. Dans les sondages comme dans les entrevues, un nombre important d'auteur.e.s universitaires ont mentionné éviter les sujets controversés ou taire certaines opinions afin d'échapper à la toxicité en ligne, « ce qui contribue à instaurer un climat d'autocensure » (p. 27). Les résultats de l'étude soulignent avec force la nécessité pour les institutions d'accorder davantage d'attention aux impacts de la haine en ligne sur les personnes non journalistes évoluant dans des environnements médiatiques.

Mais au-delà de la protection individuelle, les chercheur·e·s lancent un appel plus large dans leur conclusion : « Cette situation souligne l'importance de restaurer le bien-être collectif et la santé démocratique des plateformes numériques » (p. 28).

Au cœur de cet appel à l'action se trouve la question de savoir comment les journalistes peuvent s'engager avec le public de manière plus significative et plus positive. Comme le notent Chen et al., l'émergence des commentaires des lecteurs a d'abord été accueillie comme une opportunité de démocratiser les médias et de favoriser le dialogue au sein de la communauté. L'histoire montre qu'il s'agissait d'un optimisme erroné. Pourtant, l'idée de médias démocratiques demeure, de même que l'impulsion de chercher des alternatives élevées à l'environnement en ligne actuel, qui a mal servi les journalistes en tant que source principale d'interaction avec le public.

Cette question de l'engagement—travailler en dialogue avec diverses communautés pour produire un journalisme pertinent—est au cœur du sujet de notre prochain article, "Making it 'Local' : Community Data Journalism for Health Justice" [« Rendre 'Local' : un cas de journalisme de données en service du justice en matière de santé communautaire »], par Shirley Roburn (2025). Roburn s'intéresse de près à The Local, une start-up journalistique à but non lucratif intégrée à la communauté et dotée d'une mission sociale, qui s'est attaquée à l'un des sujets d'actualité les plus étonnamment controversés de notre époque: la pandémie de COVID-19. Roburn commence par retracer l'émergence historique des startups numériques en réponse aux déserts d'informations locales créés par la disparition rapide des organes de presse commerciaux. Leur présence a été une bougie dans une période sombre, affirme-t-elle, car de nouvelles entreprises comme The Local visaient à remédier aux défaillances passées des médias par le biais d'un journalisme plus conscient et plus engagé sur le plan social.

Roburn se penche ensuite sur la manière dont ce modèle incarne une forme de journalisme de plus en plus répandue : le journalisme de données. Dans le cas de The Local, les taux de vaccination et les données sur la localisation des pharmacies ont été analysés à travers la lentille d'équité propre à la publication. L'équipe a comparé la géographie de la distribution des vaccins avec celle des inégalités économiques et sociales dans la région de Peel.

« Cela a remis en question les récits dominants sur une souffrance collective durant la pandémie : il était clair que certaines communautés ont davantage souffert que d'autres », écrit Roburn (p. 44).

La recherche de Roburn s'inscrit dans le prolongement d'une étude antérieure, qui examinait les tweets relatifs à la pandémie du compte officiel de The Local et des journalistes, ainsi que les commentaires du public qu'ils ont générés (Chen & Roburn, 2023). En lien direct avec le propos de notre article d'ouverture, « Le côté obscur de la visibilité publique, » Roburn souligne que cette première étude souffrait d'un manque de représentativité des voix de femmes et de personnes issues de groupes minorisés, moins enclines à s'exprimer sur des forums comme X (anciennement Twitter), « en raison du niveau disproportionné de menaces, de harcèlement et de haine que, selon la recherche, ces groupes subissent sur les plateformes en ligne » (p. 39). Elle note également que les responsables de la santé, qui ont un point de vue important sur les impacts du journalisme, ne s'engagent généralement pas dans les débats sur les médias sociaux. Ainsi, pour la deuxième phase de l'étude, elle a élargi les méthodes pour inclure des entretiens qualitatifs avec des journalistes, des rédacteurs.trices, des responsables de la santé et des défenseurs de la justice en matière de santé, y compris « des personnes racialisées et des femmes qui avaient un niveau d'interaction globalement plus faible sur Twitter [maintenant X], mais des activités de communication publique substantielles sur d'autres forums » (p. 39), dans le but d'obtenir une perspective plus large sur l'impact de l'approche du journalisme de données de The Local. L'étude a également examiné le contenu des

médias grand public adjacents afin de déterminer si et comment le journalisme de données de The Local a déplacé l'attention du public vers l'inégalité en matière de vaccination dans la région de Peel. Lors des entretiens, elle a appris que le Hot Spot Tracker de The Local a incité les responsables de la santé à adopter une stratégie ciblée pour accélérer le déploiement des vaccinations dans les quartiers défavorisés, et que les mises à jour continues des données de The Local sont devenues un indicateur de performance important pour cette initiative. Des entretiens avec des journalistes ont révélé l'influence de The Local sur les reportages locaux et nationaux sur la pandémie. « De nombreux journalistes ont décrit comment la couverture par The Local des communautés mal desservies, comme Peel, et des groupes marginalisés, comme les travailleurs essentiels, les a non seulement impressionnés, mais les a incités à réfléchir à la façon dont leur propre journalisme pourrait être meilleur », rapporte Roburn (p. 42). L'analyse quantitative de Roburn des articles sur la pandémie parus dans le *Toronto Star* et le *Globe and Mail* soutient les récits qualitatifs, en particulier l'augmentation mesurable du nombre de reportages axés sur Peel dans le *Star*, ainsi que le cadrage accru du COVID par le *Globe and Mail* en relation avec les impacts sur les quartiers structurellement défavorisés.

Par ailleurs, Roburn a constaté que les journalistes de The Local ont établi des liens avec les professionnel.le.s de première ligne et les responsables de la santé communautaire, travaillant essentiellement côte à côte pour résoudre un problème communautaire. Leur couverture a aussi permis de déconstruire le stéréotype selon lequel les personnes défavorisées étaient réticentes à la vaccination, en démontrant—à travers des entrevues et des données probantes—que les membres de la communauté se présentaient pour se faire vacciner dès que les obstacles, comme l'absence de pharmacies dans certains quartiers (pharmacy deserts), étaient levés.

Bien que cette approche centrée sur la communauté puisse remettre en question les traditions du journalisme « impartial », elle a contribué à mobiliser le public et à améliorer l'accès à la vaccination. Elle a ainsi servi la mission fondamentale du journalisme : tenir les pouvoirs responsables et favoriser des changements sociaux positifs. « Alors que les infrastructures traditionnelles de diffusion de l'information locale continuent de s'éroder, cette recherche offre un brin d'espoir : le journalisme communautaire numérique hyperlocal peut non seulement contribuer à atténuer les "déserts médiatiques", mais aussi proposer une forme de journalisme plus pertinente et plus équitable », conclut Roburn (p. 42).

De la même manière, la pertinence et l'équité sont au cœur du travail journalistique évalué par les pairs que nous présentons dans ce numéro "Voices of the Khwaja sira: Navigating trans rights, religion, and journalism in Pakistan" [« Les voix du Khwaja sira : Naviguer entre droits des trans, religion et journalisme au Pakistan »] de Yumna Iftikhar (2025). Soit dit en passant, j'aimerais signaler à nos lecteur.trice.s que ce travail journalistique a fait l'objet du même processus d'évaluation par les pairs en double insu que les articles scientifiques et les notes de recherche que nous publions. L'inclusion des écrits journalistiques reconnaît que les principaux travaux journalistiques, tout en incarnant une forme différente d'expression publique, font appel à des niveaux similaires de recherche, d'entrevues et de considérations éthiques que les travaux universitaires traditionnellement reconnus, et bénéficient également de l'apport de pairs qui sont des experts à la fois des méthodes journalistiques et du sujet en discussion. Il s'agit là d'un aspect important de notre mandat éditorial qui, à notre connaissance, est unique dans le monde de l'édition universitaire. (Nous invitons nos lecteur.trice.s à nous informer s'ils. elles rencontrent d'autres revues universitaires qui publient du journalisme évalué par des pairs, car un échange d'informations avec leurs rédacteur. trice.s serait utile à nos efforts).

Pour en revenir au travail journalistique présenté dans ces pages, l'objectif de la recherche d'Iftikhar était d'explorer la réaction de la communauté trans pakistanaise au renversement des droits trans nouvellement acquis par le tribunal islamique de la charia du pays. Il est important de noter que ses recherches se sont déroulées à Multan, une ville dont la population ne représente qu'une fraction de celle des grands centres urbains pakistanais. « Alors que la plupart des journalistes s'intéressent à la communauté transgenre des grandes villes comme Karachi et Islamabad, le projet s'est concentré sur les personnes transgenres dont la voix était souvent ignorée en raison de leur situation géographique et de leur manque de connaissances en anglais », écrit-elle dans l'introduction de l'article journalistique multimédia qui en a résulté, intitulé « La communauté transgenre se bat pour protéger ses droits au Pakistan » (p. 56). Pour Iftikhar, gagner la confiance de cette communauté impliquait de repenser son rôle d'intervieweuse par rapport aux personnes interrogées. À son arrivée à Multan, ses premiers entretiens étaient

des entretiens individuels, au cours desquels elle, son traducteur et son équipe de tournage étaient plus nombreux que la personne interrogée. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'une histoire communautaire, les lumières vives de la vidéo ont littéralement braqué les projecteurs sur des individus, et non sur la communauté, ce qui les a mis mal à l'aise. Dans l'article, elle décrit comment une aide locale a suggéré un environnement plus détendu, à savoir réunir les membres de la communauté transgenre autour d'un déjeuner dans une pizzeria. Iftikhar a observé comment la dynamique a changé lorsque les personnes transgenres se sont réunies en un réseau soudé, elle et son équipe se trouvant désormais en position minoritaire. Le concept d'« interviews » s'est transformé en dialogue communautaire, les participant.e.s étant plus à même d'exprimer leurs expériences tout en se soutenant les un.e.s les autres tout au long de la conversation. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'une méthode de recherche plus équitable pour toutes les personnes impliquées, Iftikhar était consciente qu'elle troublait les eaux du journalisme traditionnel. Elle a notamment payé la pizza et financé le transport des participant.e.s, ce que les rédacteur.trice.s en chef des journaux occidentaux auraient probablement désapprouvé, estimant que cela se rapprochait trop du « journalisme de chéquier ». Si, dans le monde universitaire, il est normal d'offrir des honoraires et de couvrir les dépenses des participants à la recherche, Iftikhar note que les lignes directrices en matière d'éthique du journalisme professionnel auxquelles on se réfère généralement au Canada interpréteraient probablement le repas pizza comme une relation financière susceptible de brouiller l'authenticité des informations partagées avec la journaliste. Face à ce dilemme, Iftikhar se réfère à la journaliste américaine Nora Neus, qui affirme que les journalistes profitent injustement des traumatismes lorsqu'ils travaillent avec des personnes marginalisées sans leur offrir de compensation (Neus, 2023). Iftkhar affirme que «le fait d'exclure des voix parce que nous, en tant que journalistes, n'offrons pas de compensation, peut avoir pour conséquence que des voix importantes sont omises des conversations sur des questions qui les touchent directement. Si je n'avais pas apporté un soutien financier aux personnes pour qu'elles se réunissent, cet article n'aurait pas vu le jour.»

Certes, le journalisme de chéquier au niveau du paiement récemment révélé de 40 millions de dollars à Melania Trump pour sa participation à un documentaire « soulève des questions critiques sur le contrôle éditorial, l'intégrité journalistique et les limites floues entre la propagande politique et la narration documentaire » (Goldhan 2025, par. 2). Cependant, l'expérience d'Iftikhar incite fortement les formateur.trice.s en journalisme et les éthicien.ne.s à élucider un cadre plus nuancé autour du sujet de la compensation à la source, comblant ainsi un déficit dans les déclarations éthiques qui guident notre pratique professionnelle.

La décision d'Iftikhar de situer sa recherche en dehors des grands centres urbains souligne également l'importance des expériences locales, que ce soit au Pakistan ou au Canada. C'est un concept bien défendu par Pauline Dakin (2025) dans son commentaire "Shots fired : A local news desert leads to lack of crime reporting" [« Coups de feu: l'absence de médias locaux compromet la couverture des faits criminels »]. Lorsqu'une fusillade a lieu dans le quartier de Dakin à Halifax, la seule preuve que quelque chose s'est produit est le ruban jaune de la police et, le lendemain, une déclaration de la police rédigée en termes vagues et transmise par les salles de presse locales, qui manquent de personnel pour rechercher davantage d'informations qui pourraient être utiles à la sécurité et au bien-être de la communauté. Dakin documente la diminution du nombre de journalistes de première ligne au niveau local et dans l'ensemble du Canada, ainsi que les recherches récentes sur le déclin de la transparence de la police au Canada. Elle illustre ensuite clairement comment cela se passe au niveau hyperlocal : « Entre le silence de la police et le manque apparent d'intérêt ou de capacité à couvrir la fusillade, les habitant.e.s du quartier se demandent si le tireur est toujours dans les parages et si la police a des pistes ou des inquiétudes pour la sécurité publique » (p. 76).

Le volume 4, numéro 2, se termine par un compte rendu du nouvel ouvrage de Christopher Cheung, *Under the White Gaze : Solving the Problem of Race and Representation in Canadian Journalism*, [« *Sous le regard des Blancs : Résoudre le problème de la race et de la représentation dans le journalisme canadien* »] publié par UBC Press en 2024. La critique Shenaz Kermalli (2025) note que les questions relatives à la race et à la représentation sont devenues centrales dans les discussions sur le journalisme canadien, mais que les ouvrages savants sur le sujet restent rares. L'ouvrage de Cheung constitue une intervention opportune et nécessaire, qui nous invite à réfléchir plus profondément à notre susceptibilité collective aux effets totalisants du regard blanc, même chez les journalistes BIPOC. « Tous ceux.celles qui liront le livre de Cheung reconnaîtront probablement—et peut-être s'en mordront les doigts—les erreurs qu'ils ont commises dans leurs propres reportages

(moi y compris) », écrit Kermalli (p. 78). Cependant, Kermalli note qu'un impact plus important soulevé par Cheung est son observation que les journalistes racialisé.e.s ont tendance à quitter l'industrie, une tendance qui, elle en convient, est une « vérité qui fait réfléchir et qui est douloureuse » (p.78). De la critique de Kermalli, on peut déduire l'espoir que la présentation de *Under The White Gaze* aux étudiant.e.s en journalisme pourrait non seulement réduire le nombre de moments gênants, mais aussi donner naissance à une génération de journalistes mieux équipé.e.s pour remettre en question - et changer - les salles de presse canadiennes.

C'est d'ailleurs le mandat général de *Faits & frictions* : susciter des défis et des changements dans notre domaine. En terminant notre travail sur le volume 4, nous entamons la cinquième année de publication de la revue, une étape modeste mais significative. Nous avons réussi ce parcours grâce à la force des bénévoles qui partagent la mission de perturber et de renforcer la position sociale du journalisme, non seulement en tant que pratique professionnelle mais aussi en tant que discipline universitaire au sein des établissements d'enseignement post-secondaire. En repensant à ce numéro, je suis fière que son contenu reflète en grande partie ce que nous défendons en tant que collectif éditorial. Depuis le début, *Faits & frictions* s'efforce non seulement de publier les travaux d'universitaires reconnus, mais aussi d'offrir un espace accueillant aux universitaires émergent.e.s et aux étudiant.e.s diplômé.e.s, afin qu'ils puissent bénéficier d'un mentorat et d'un soutien lors de leurs premières incursions dans le monde de l'édition universitaire. Nous avons également repoussé les limites de ce à quoi peut aspirer une revue universitaire, en incluant l'audio et la vidéo comme formes de diffusion des connaissances scientifiques et en invitant les travaux journalistiques à faire l'objet d'une évaluation par les pairs. Cette dernière initiative tient compte du fait qu'une grande partie de notre recherche scientifique est diffusée par le biais du journalisme, un moyen puissant de relier la recherche à un public plus large de lecteur.trice.s, d'auditeur.trice.s et de téléspectateur.trice.s. Fidèles à notre déclaration éditoriale, rédigée à la suite de nombreuses discussions collégiales, nous nous efforçons de servir de lieu de rencontre pour nos collègues afin de soulever des débats épineux, d'échanger des perspectives diverses et de s'informer mutuellement des nouvelles ressources en matière de recherche et d'enseignement. Nous sommes également en libre accès, et ce avec dévouement. Je pense que ce numéro de *Faits & frictions* constitue un ensemble bien équilibré de notre mission. À ce stade, on peut dire que l'idée d'une revue canadienne consacrée au journalisme est désormais un fait établi et florissant.

Pour moi, personnellement, c'est le bon moment pour me retirer et regarder *Faits & frictions* poursuivre sa croissance sous une direction renouvelée. En juillet 2024, j'ai officiellement pris ma retraite de mon poste de professeure à l'Université des Premières Nations du Canada et, un an plus tard, je quitte le poste de rédactrice en chef de *Faits & frictions*, que j'occupe depuis la création de la revue. Je suis remplacée par Trish Audette-Longo, de l'université Carleton, qui a occupé ce poste à titre d'observatrice au cours de l'année écoulée. Les lecteur.trice.s se souviendront peut-être de Dr. Audette-Longo comme étant à l'origine de l'une de nos publications les plus réussies, le numéro spécial de l'automne 2023 intitulé Changement forcé : La pédagogie de la pandémie et l'enseignement du journalisme. Outre son doctorat en communication, Dr. Audette-Longo a acquis une expérience de première ligne en tant que reporter dans des salles de presse à travers le pays. Ses recherches universitaires portent sur l'étude du journalisme inclusif et engagé, un intérêt qui promet de façonner son approche à *Faits & frictions*, en invitant et en soutenant des voix diverses à se développer et à partager leurs connaissances par le biais de la revue. Elle a notamment lancé des ateliers de recherche, dont le premier, qu'elle a animé avec sa collègue Sherry S. Yu le 22 mai, dans le cadre de l'assemblée générale annuelle de Écoles-J Canada. Elle participera également à la rédaction d'un numéro spécial sur le journalisme engagé au printemps 2026, en collaboration avec les rédactrices invitées Magda Konieczna, de l'Université Concordia, et Gabriela Perdomo, de l'Université Mount Royal. Il est également prévu de publier un numéro spécial sur la question du journalisme engagé. Ainsi, avant même de prendre officiellement la direction de *Faits & frictions*, Dr. Audette-Longo élargit déjà le champ d'action de la revue.

Pour mes derniers mots dans cet espace éditorial, je souhaite exprimer ma profonde gratitude à notre éditeur, Écoles-J Canada, à nos partenaires de J-Source et à la communauté grandissante de bénévoles, de pairs évaluateur.trice.s et de contributeur.trice.s qui ont permis à *Faits & frictions* de passer de l'idée à la réalité. Je suis également profondément reconnaissante aux lecteur.trice.s qui partagent les articles et citent les contribuables de *Faits & frictions*, transmettant ainsi l'important travail de nos auteur.e.s à l'ensemble du monde. Merci à tous !

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The dark side of public visibility: How academic authors perceive and cope with anti-press hostility

Le côté obscur de la visibilité publique : comment les auteur.es académiques perçoivent et font face à l'hostilité de la presse

Sibo Chen, Nicole Blanchett, and S. Lecourt

ABSTRACT

As anti-press hostility intensifies globally, its impact on academics, whose presence as authors in journalism-based publications has increased in recent years, presents an understudied subject in communication and media studies literature. Approaching this subject using data from a survey of 732 authors affiliated with The Conversation Canada, a news startup specializing in explanatory journalism, this mixed-methods case study examined how academic authors perceive and cope with toxic comments and varying forms of anti-press hostility. Survey data are contextualized with qualitative interviews. The findings suggest that toxic comments pose a notable challenge to practice at The Conversation Canada. These comments are leading to self-censorship by causing a number of the affected authors to avoid expressing their viewpoints or writing about certain topics, as well as to reconsider their knowledge mobilization efforts. In sum, this study contributes to the body of literature on anti-press hostility and informs relevant public and policy discussions on the need to mitigate polarization online.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: anti-press hostility, dark participation, digital trolling, harassment, hostility towards the press, online hate, toxic comments, The Conversation Canada, journalism

Mots-clés : hostilité anti-presse, participation obscure, trolling numérique, harcèlement, hostilité envers la presse, haine en ligne, commentaires toxiques, The Conversation Canada, journalisme

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RÉSUMÉ

Alors que l'hostilité envers la presse s'intensifie à l'échelle mondiale, son impact sur les universitaires, dont la présence en tant que auteur.es dans des publications basées sur le journalisme a augmenté ces dernières années, constitue un sujet sous-étudié dans la littérature sur la communication et les études médiatiques. Abordant ce sujet à l'aide de données provenant d'une enquête menée auprès de 732 auteurs affiliés à The Conversation Canada, une entreprise de presse spécialisée dans le journalisme explicatif, cette étude de cas à méthodes mixtes a examiné la manière dont les auteur.es universitaires perçoivent les commentaires toxiques et les diverses formes d'hostilité envers la presse. Les données de l'enquête sont mises en contexte par des entretiens qualitatifs. Les résultats suggèrent que les commentaires toxiques posent un défi important à la pratique de The Conversation Canada. Ces commentaires conduisent à l'autocensure en amenant un certain nombre d'auteur.es concernés à éviter d'exprimer leur point de vue ou d'écrire sur certains sujets, ainsi qu'à reconsidérer leurs efforts de mobilisation des connaissances. En résumé, cette étude contribue à l'ensemble de la littérature sur l'hostilité anti-presse et alimente les discussions publiques et politiques pertinentes sur la nécessité d'atténuer la polarisation en ligne.

INTRODUCTION

In communication and media studies, anti-press hostility, also known as "hostility towards the press" (Miller, 2023a, p. 1230), is a well-established research topic whose specifics have been characterized by a variety of terms, including abuse, aggression, bullying, hostility, incivility, violence, and mobbing (e.g., Cheruiyot, 2022; Kim & Shin, 2022; Miller, 2023a; Waisbord, 2020). As these terms suggest, anti-press hostility encompasses a broad spectrum of attitudes, expressions, or actions that are antagonistic towards journalists and media organizations. In this study, we specifically focus on online harassment in the form of toxic remarks found in the comment sections of news websites, and those sent directly to authors through social media and emails.

The deteriorating online environment affects not only professional journalists but also others engaged in journalistic work. For example, a rising demand for knowledge mobilization in academia, resulting from collective pushes by funding agencies, universities, and the public, prompts many academics to write opinion and analysis pieces or other forms of journalistic content. The increased public visibility brought about by these articles, however, exposes their authors to the same toxic comments and other forms of online harassment faced by journalists (Glassey, 2017), an inevitable consequence of increased engagement with larger audiences (Gosse et al., 2021; Oksanen et al., 2022).

Academics engaging in public scholarship are often subjected to the same kinds of vitriol faced by journalists even when they aren't engaging in "journalism" *per se*. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated "infodemic" have further polarized public discourse and increased hostility towards those sharing their expertise and research-based insights ("COVID scientists in the public eye," 2021; Wright et al., 2022). The drivers of the harassment and intimidation of academics are complex, widespread, and global, as indicated by a growing body of research and news stories (e.g., Frangou, 2019; Gewin, 2018; Gosse et al., 2021; Nogrady, 2024; Oksanen et al., 2022). This trend underscores the pressing necessity to comprehend the intimidation of public communicators, which is a burgeoning issue that negatively impacts democratic discourse.

Following Miller and Lewis (2022), we define harassment as "unwanted behaviors [in both verbal and physical forms] that are sexual, abusive, sexist or aggressive in nature" (p.81). There is a concerning trend of escalating hostility toward the press worldwide. In North America, for instance, the pervasiveness and grave consequences of this issue have been widely documented (e.g., Canada Press Freedom Project, 2024; Eschner, 2022; Holton et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2020; Miller, 2021; Miller & Kocan, 2022; Waisbord, 2020). Journalists are vulnerable to various forms of harassment (sexist, racist, violent, etc.) that have a wide range of negative effects. Similar trends are also observed in other parts of the world, irrespective of their levels of press freedom (Chen et al., 2020; Kim & Shin, 2022; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Obermaier et al., 2018; Posetti et al., 2021; Tandoc et al., 2021). In short, anti-press hostility presents a sprawling and multifaceted issue with distinct nuances at both the local and national levels (Miller, 2023; Waisbord, 2022a). Its alarming prevalence not only endangers the autonomy and safety of journalists but also imperils the anticipated role of journalism in a democratic society.

The issue also raises important questions concerning journalist-audience relationships in the digital era. When digital journalism initially gained popularity in the early 2000s, the seemingly endless possibilities it offered for interactions between journalists and audiences led to optimism among scholars and practitioners. There was belief that greater citizen participation in the news process would rejuvenate journalism and strengthen democracy (Lewis et al., 2020; Quandt, 2018; Westlund, 2020).

In tandem with the rapid expansion of digital media, however, the optimistic outlook was dimmed by "dark participation," namely "negative, selfish, or even deeply sinister forms of audience participation, such as 'trolling,' (Coles & West, 2016; Mihaylov & Nakov, 2016) strategic 'piggybacking' on journalistic reputation, and large-scale disinformation in uncontrolled news

environments" (Quandt, 2018, p. 40). As online news consumption continues to grow, journalists' performances are increasingly measured by their ability to interact with audiences on social media platforms (Davis Kempton & Connolly-Ahern, 2022; Blanchett, 2021; Tandoc et al., 2021). Yet, these interactions are frequently marred by dark participation, impacting editorial choices and exacerbating the difficulties faced by journalists (Blanchett et al., 2024).

Given the increasing presence of academics as news authors, the scope and nature of anti-press hostility they encounter presents an understudied subject in communication and media studies literature. This article aims to address this gap by conducting an exploratory study focusing on authors affiliated with The Conversation Canada, a news startup specializing in explanatory journalism and exclusively publishing articles authored by academics. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines surveys and interviews, the study sheds light on how academics perceive and cope with toxic comments and other forms of anti-press hostility, thereby contributing to policy discussions on the need to mitigate the escalation of factors such as societal polarization across Western democracies (World Economic Forum, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review begins with an overview of research on anti-press hostility and then explores its connection to academic work and academics writing in journalistic spaces. The launch of the *UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity* in 2015 was a major catalyst for renewed global scholarly and public interest in anti-press hostility (Fadnes et al., 2019; Miller, 2023). While significant attention has been paid to how journalists' safety remains a long-standing problem in the Global South, underscored by concerning cases of arbitrary detention, forced disappearances, kidnapping, torture, and murder (Reporters without Borders, 2023; Waisbord, 2022a), there is an expanding body of research exploring what exacerbates journalists' experiences with various forms of hostility in democratic and semi-democratic countries (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Eschner, 2022; Löfgren & Örnebring, 2016; Miller, 2021; Posetti et al., 2021; Stahel & Schoen, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2021).

Anti-press hostility: Structural factors

A complex web of factors contributes to escalating hostility toward the press in recent years. For example, the organizational contexts in which journalists work can either aggravate or ameliorate the anxiety, fatigue, and frustration they experience when targeted by harassment (Westlund et al., 2022). Unfortunately, research also shows that many news organizations commonly fail to make systematic efforts to thwart hostile interactions with external actors (Holton et al., 2023). Some scholars attribute this deficiency to media managers' vague understanding of online harassment or underestimation of its severity, while others argue that the importance of online traffic to news organizations' economic performance today discourages them from imposing stringent measures regulating user-generated content (Hiltunen, 2022; Malcorps et al., 2022). Regardless of the causes, journalism scholars agree that the absence of formalized protocols on such interactions at many news organizations leads to an individualistic, case-by-case approach to the handling of harassment incidents, failing to recognize such incidents as a challenge requiring comprehensive institutional support (Pearson et al., 2022; Nelson, 2022; Waisbord, 2022a; Westlund et al., 2022).

Internet culture, in addition to organizational contexts, is another major structural factor shaping the dynamics of anti-press hostility. The past decade has witnessed the amplification of online toxicity marked by aggressive behaviors, hate speech, and incivility. Quandt (2018) refers to these negative forms of digital citizen participation as "dark participation" (p. 36) and associates their prevalence with the recent populist wave in Western democracies. In accordance with this perspective, scholars such as Hiltunen (2022), Waisbord (2020), and Westlund (2021) suggest that the surge of dark participation is fueled by dis/misinformation, societal divides, and political polarization, which reflects the fragmentation

of the public sphere evident today. Additionally, research shows that platform affordances enable emotionally-laden content, particularly that which expresses anger, to move faster and more widely in online environments (Paletz et al., 2023).

Dark participation strategically targets social media and news comment sections because their existing large audience base offers agitators and trolls with immediate visibility without any formidable barriers. Meanwhile, as social media enhances the digital publicity of journalists—which shifts public attention from journalism to those doing the reporting—journalists, and anyone doing journalism work, face growing threats from individuals who view news organizations as institutions propagating ideologies they strongly disagree with (Brin & Charlton, 2022). In short, the mounting challenge posed by dark participation to journalism not only prompts us to reassess our understanding of what constitutes legitimate media criticism, but also highlights how the concept of free speech is increasingly manipulated by members of the far-right, who position themselves as persistent and vocal critics of mainstream media—a strategy that fuels cynicism towards such outlets (Broockman & Kalla, 2022; Carlson et al., 2021; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Anti-press hostility and journalist identities

Journalists are not equally impacted by anti-press hostility; gender, race/ethnicity, religion, and disability are factors in who is targeted (Chen et al., 2020; Davis Kempton & Connolly-Ahern, 2022; Lewis & Coddington, 2020; Miller, 2023a; Waisbord, 2020). A prime illustration of this pattern is that women journalists are more likely to face intimidation and harassment compared to their male counterparts. As Miller and Lewis (2022) summarize, women journalists face four main types of harassment: "(1) disruptive in-person harassment, (2) physical and abrasive in-person harassment, (3) online harassment as unwanted sexual advances, and (4) online harassment as threats and criticisms" (p. 87). Such harassment, besides sexually objectifying women journalists, trivializes their professional accomplishments, resulting in significant repercussions on individual, interpersonal, and professional levels.

The research conducted by Barão da Silva et al. (2022), for instance, revealed how a thriving hostile environment affects daily workflow, disrupts family routines, and causes emotional distress among Brazilian women journalists. Many women journalists also report that safety and privacy concerns place them in a quandary: either they continue to engage with audiences, thereby exposing themselves to potential online abuse, or they choose self-protection by regularly blocking suspicious social media users (Miller, 2023a; Waisbord, 2022b). The latter inevitably reduces audience engagement, an outcome that could be detrimental to their careers.

Additionally, there are observed gender and cultural differences in how journalists cope with harassment. Miller (2023b) and Stahel and Schoen (2020), among others, have suggested that women journalists tend to employ avoidance strategies more frequently than male journalists. While, as noted by these scholars, there is a possible difference in behavior related to gender-role socialization, there is also the issue of the severity of toxicity in comments received. Online attacks directed at women are considerably more hateful and violent than those experienced by men (Posetti et al., 2021); therefore, it would be logical to avoid such exposure. Compounding the nuances of journalists' coping strategies are cultural factors. In cultures where societal norms discourage public confrontation with masculinity, women journalists are hindered from leveraging personal social media channels to share their experiences (Barão da Silva et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2020; Tandoc et al., 2021).

The impacts of anti-press hostility

Journalists' exposure to online and offline harassment has significant implications not only on their mental health but also on their work attitudes. Journalists report that harassment induces negative emotions such as discomfort, anger, lethargy, and fear, which in turn drives certain work-related behaviors such as avoiding interviews, reducing social media presence, and even considering leaving the profession (Lewis et al., 2020; Miller, 2021; Pearson et al., 2022).

In more severe cases where journalists have been assaulted while covering street protests, for example, the result can be severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, further reinforcing the desire to leave journalism (Miller & Kocan, 2022).

Harassment also influences the interaction dynamics among journalists themselves, as well as between journalists and their audiences. A study focusing on South Korean journalists (Kim & Shin, 2022) revealed that with minimal institutional support, journalists manage the overwhelming negative emotions caused by harassment using emotion-focused coping mechanisms, such as striving for perfectionism in their daily work, blaming fellow journalists, creating emotional distance from audiences, and expressing resentment against readers. Similarly, Lewis and his colleagues (2020) argue that "the more often a journalist is harassed online, the more likely they are to take a dim view of their audiences across several key dimensions: that is, to see their audiences as less rational and unlike themselves, and to see interaction with their audiences as less valuable" (p. 1062).

Meanwhile, anti-press hostility fosters a climate of fear within news organizations, potentially undermining the autonomy and editorial independence of journalists. This contradicts a fundamental premise prevalent in previous research on reciprocal journalism, namely that increased interactions between journalists and the public could promote mutual trust, benefit sharing, and community formation (Deavours et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2020; Quandt, 2018). In practice, however, this premise is substantially compromised by various forms of dark participation, prompting questions about what constitutes legitimate media criticism (Carlson et al., 2021; Cheruiyot, 2022; Devours et al., 2022; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

A concerning trend that reflects these questions is the rise of "mob censorship" (Miller, 2021a; Waisbord, 2020, 2022a; Westlund et al., 2022), as exemplified by populist leaders' persistent demonization of journalists and mainstream news media. Mob censorship, as a violent form of public speech intended to intimidate opponents into silence, underscores the precarious nature of upholding effective democratic speech rights in the face of looming polarization. The growing threat that mob censorship poses to journalism demonstrates the unsettling reality that censorship is no longer the exclusive domain of powerful entities such as governments and corporations seeking to impede freedom of expression. To mitigate mob censorship, it's crucial to distinguish between criticism and cynicism. Ideally, criticism is a rational act aimed at improving current conditions, while cynicism is generally an emotionally-driven judgement meant to breed distrust (Waisbord, 2020). In practice, the majority of alleged "media criticism" from far-right groups merely serves as a pretext for cynical assaults intended to provoke antagonism towards mainstream news media (Cheruiyot, 2022; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

In sum, safeguarding journalists, and those who do journalistic work, from online and offline harassment extends beyond mere employment rights issues—it constitutes matters of human rights and press freedom, which significantly impact the quality of information circulated in the public sphere and the diversity of people sharing that information (Cheruiyot, 2022; Kim & Shin, 2022; Miller, 2021a; Waisbord, 2022a).

Hostility targeting academics

The current literature on anti-press hostility primarily focuses on the experiences of professional journalists, without paying much attention to the increasing number of academics engaging in journalistic work. Considering this gap, this research explores the extent to which anti-press hostility curtails scholars' enthusiasm for public writing. Online hostility targeting journalists and academics are related phenomena that reflect intensifying anti-establishment and anti-intellectual sentiments in the public sphere (Waisbord, 2020; Wright et al., 2022). Although academics, whether featured as experts in news stories or as authors of opinion or analysis pieces, tend to not identify themselves as "journalists," they are often perceived by the public as "elite voices." This perception aligns them with journalists in the eyes of many, resulting in similar experiences of harassment and hostility when they participate in public conversations ("COVID scientists in the public eye," 2021).

Previous research on online harassment targeting academics identified causes and consequences that parallel those observed in studies of anti-press hostility. For instance, investigations by Gosse et al. (2019) and Oksanen et al. (2022) have shown that online harassment is deeply intertwined with the identity and work of scholars. Such harassment and violence can also seep into physical spaces in academia, as seen in a recent stabbing in a University of Waterloo classroom (MacDonald & Kalentsis, 2023). The pressures stemming from such harassment can lead to significant psychological distress, comparable to the experiences reported by journalists facing hostility (Lewis et al., 2020; Miller & Kocan, 2022; Pearson et al., 2022). These findings highlight a troubling overlap in the challenges that both groups face as they navigate their roles as public figures.

Moreover, academics, like journalists, frequently report a lack of institutional support when targeted by online hostility (Holton et al., 2023; Nogrady, 2024). This exacerbates their vulnerability to harassment, rendering them less equipped to cope with the fallouts from their knowledge mobilization activities. Thus, in today's digital landscape, where online harassment is increasingly characterized by organized mob censorship rather than isolated acts of aggression, it is important to document and analyze the distinctive experiences and challenges encountered by academics who face increased opportunities of exposure to harassment when they venture into journalistic spaces.

DATA AND METHODS

This study focuses on the experiences of authors affiliated with The Conversation Canada (https://theconversation.com/ca), a member of a global network of non-profit news organizations (The Conversation network) that specialize in publishing research-based articles in collaboration with scholars across a wide range of universities. In Canada, it is published by the Academic Journalism Society. The subsequent sections will offer a synopsis of The Conversation network's journalism practice, followed by a detailed account of the data collection and analysis procedures.

The Conversation network

What distinguishes The Conversation network members apart from legacy news media are two features. First, they only publish articles authored by academics. A prospective author must be associated with a university. They also must demonstrate their research expertise relevant to the story they pitch or have been asked to write during preliminary discussions with a handling editor. The second feature lies in the depth and breadth of Conversation articles, many of which synthesize findings from multiple empirical studies to explain complex and high-profile issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the network published not only authoritative explanations of the scientific basis for public health measures written by epidemiologists, but also critical analyses of the pandemic's sociocultural effects written by humanities scholars (Chen, 2022).

As evidenced by both features, The Conversation network is a practitioner of explanatory journalism. Similar to other explanatory news websites such as FiveThirtyEight and Vox, the network's global expansion benefits from two trends that have recently boosted the popularity of explanatory news (Chen, 2022; Hermida & Young, 2019; Mann, 2016). First, there is a growing public interest in in-depth news pieces that elucidate the complicated concepts underpinning high-profile public issues. Second, the availability of data analysis and visualization applications (e.g., Google Spreadsheet and Tableau) significantly reduces the technical barriers to data-driven storytelling that makes complex topics and datasets easier to understand.

Departing from the practices of legacy news media where academics mainly hold the peripheral role as sources of quotations, The Conversation network brands itself as an innovator. It implements a "scholars as journalists" model that integrates academics into the news production process. In this model, "researchers assume the roles of journalists, undertaking traditional tasks such as pitching and writing a story" (Hermida & Young, 2019, p. 94). Concurrently, the primary responsibility of The Conversation network's editorial teams is to aid scholars in creating content that has "journalistic flair."

By promoting reciprocity between journalists and academics, The Conversation network seeks to transform universities into what could be described as "giant newsrooms." Its establishment reflects the ongoing deterritorialization of media space and the evolving public perceptions of what constitutes journalism practice (Blanchett et al., 2025; Deuze & Witschge, 2018). This not only enables the publication of articles on topics requiring a great deal of specialized knowledge (e.g., epidemiology, economics, virology, etc.), but also harnesses academic expertise to strengthen the credibility of Conversation articles against dis/misinformation (Allen & Lucky, 2023).

Moreover, all Conversation articles are published under a Creative Commons license, enabling news organizations worldwide to republish them. In Canada, for instance, top republishers of Conversation articles include the websites of well-known legacy media such as the *National Post*, Global News, and *Maclean's*. This promotes the dissemination and outreach of research for the public good.

The above characteristics position The Conversation network as a promising force in global journalism innovation, and its efforts to combat dis/misinformation could be a factor in increased public recognition. From July 2020 to June 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic ignited a significant public demand for expert opinions, The Conversation United States (2022) alone attracted 68 million reads per month (including republication in other media). As of the end of 2023, it had accumulated "over 1.1 billion pageviews since launch" (The Conversation United States, 2024, p. 4).

In 2023, The Conversation Canada and its Francophone edition "published about 1,400 news and analysis articles . . . written by 1,700 academic experts from Canadian universities; and these articles were viewed over 32 million times by readers" (Varano, 2024 January 1, para. 2). Yet, accompanying this substantial rise in digital publicity is a pressing concern: the pervasive anti-press hostility now affects Conversation authors in a variety of ways.

In late 2022, for instance, The Conversation Canada was inundated with toxic comments that severely impeded direct and reciprocal conversations between academics and readers. Trolls and agitators overwhelmed the website's small editorial team, forcing it to implement the policy that "comments are only open on selected articles and are typically open for 72hrs" (*T*he Conversation Canada, 2021, para 3). Some of its contributors even suffered from sustained attacks on social media. In personal communications between the research team and the website's editors, the latter acknowledged online harassment as a serious challenge to authors and to the editors' daily work. In light of this situation, the impact of toxic comments was an important focus of a survey of Conversation Canada authors who had published on either the English or French websites, conducted in late 2022.

Data collection and analysis

The current study employs a sequential mixed-methods approach that combines a quantitative survey and semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the survey and interview results is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How prevalent are toxic comments targeting Conversation Canada authors?

RQ2: What is the nature of toxic comments targeting Conversation Canada authors?

RQ3: How do Conversation Canada authors perceive and respond to toxic comments?

Our research team conducted a survey of Conversation authors' perspectives on a variety of issues, such as their understanding of journalistic work, their experiences with the publishing process, and the impact of public writing on their scholarly work. The current paper only reports on data related to anti-press hostility. The development of survey questions involved consultation with Conversation Canada editors, and review of sample surveys from previous studies (e.g., Lewis et al., 2020; Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Miller, 2021; Stahel & Schoen, 2020; Canadian Association of Journalists, 2021). The questionnaire and methodology was

approved by the Research Ethics Board of Toronto Metropolitan University (file number 2022-138), and informed consent was obtained from participants. The Conversation Canada provided a list of its authors for survey distribution; however, it had no part in the collection of data or access to the raw data collected.

Dates of survey administration were September 7 to October 31, 2022. A total of 732 Conversation Canada authors responded to the survey, a 15% response rate. Following the survey, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom with 37 respondents who agreed to further elaborate their survey answers, including some who had experiences of online harassment. Five Conversation Canada editors were also interviewed via Zoom, to contextualize established processes within the organization and, in some cases, to contextualize policies surrounding practice for avoiding and/or managing toxic comments. Emailed clarifications of interview comments were provided by some editors after interviews. Interviews were performed by one researcher or one of three research assistants.

Qualitative research methods should differ based on what suits a particular study (Rubin, 2021). The aim of interviews for this case study was to explore overall patterns that emerged in survey data, not directly compare an individual participant's interview data to their survey data. Due to the specificity of subject matter being explored and to respect the time of participants, interviews were focused (Creswell & Poth, 2016), ranging from seven to 48 minutes in length and averaging 17 minutes in duration. In terms of value, there is "nothing magical or absolute" (Seidman, 2006, p. 20) about an interview's timeframe. Longer interviews don't always result in better data (Thorsteinson, 2017), and even a "one-shot question" (Patton, p. 378) can provide useful information. What's more important is to recognize that, across a dataset, "the repetition of an aspect of experience . . . takes on weight" (Seidman, 2006, p. 127).

More than 200 authors expressed interest in being interviewed for this study by providing contact information in their survey responses. Researchers accessed that contact information through a randomized list of these participants, created from aggregated survey data versus individual surveys. Minimal curation of the list was performed to ensure there was no overrepresentation of authors from a particular university based on email-address extensions and that no participant appeared on both the French and English participant lists. One-hundred-ninety participants were contacted for interviews, but not all responded and not all who responded followed through with an interview. Researchers interviewed willing participants from the randomized list until no new themes were emerging and ~18% of survey respondents who expressed interest in being interviewed had participated. All interviews for this study were completed between October 13, 2022 and April 19, 2023. They were conversational in nature to allow for exploration of participants' experience and opinions (Tracy, 2019), and to acknowledge there are "multiple realities constructed through lived . . . experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 81). However, the following sets of questions were prepared in advance and asked of each participant:

Questions for authors:

- How would you describe or identify the type of writing you do for The Conversation? (**would you describe your work as journalism, if not answered)
- What are the benefits of writing for The Conversation?
- What are the drawbacks of writing for The Conversation?

Questions for editors:

- Could you describe the editorial process of the publication of a Conversation article from pitch to posting?
- What are the challenges of working with academic authors to create journalistic work?
- What are the benefits of working with academic authors to create journalistic work?
- What do you consider to be explanatory journalism?

With a goal of contextualizing survey data, interview data were thematically analyzed (Riger

& Sigurvinsdottir, 2016) by first using open coding to look for general themes throughout the data collection period, followed by focused coding (Rubin, 2021) once interviews were completed and themes were established. Participants shared information based on their particular perceptions, but individual quotes were selected to represent patterns seen in the overall dataset. Themes identified from interviews with Conversation authors included inconsistent definitions of journalism; positive experiences with publication; and, particular to this paper, negative experiences with publication that included a sub-theme of toxic interactions. These interactions included communication via website or social media comments, and/or communication sent via email, and ranged from questioning an author's credibility to "personal attacks," trolls, "rude comments," and "bullying." Themes for editors mirrored those of authors, but from a different perspective, with some specific observations related to challenging the norms of traditional gatekeeping processes.

FINDINGS

As shown in **Table 1**'s demographic statistics self-reported by survey respondents, although the survey focuses on Conversation Canada authors, the sample represents a diverse range of academics from a variety of backgrounds. In accordance with previous research (Lewis & Coddington, 2020; Miller, 2023a, 2023b; Waisbord, 2020), the analysis focuses on demographics of race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and religion, and assesses whether these markers make scholars writing in a journalistic style more prone to anti-press hostility.

For this purpose, the research team re-coded the demographic data in Table 1 as collapsed variables. Binary logistic regression and ordinal logistic regression were used to assess the potential influence of these variables on the frequency and severity of hostility experienced by the survey respondents.

Table 2 presents the survey questions regarding toxic comments.

Analysis begins with an overview of the frequency and severity of anti-press and online hostility encountered by Conversation Canada authors. It then evaluates the role of social identity (e.g., gender, race, and religion) in triggering harassment. Further, it examines these markers' influence on the actions taken in response to harassment and the perceived consequences from such incidents. The section ends by summarizing insights gleaned from the research team's interviews with survey respondents that help contextualize survey data.

Table 1. *Survey Descriptive Statistics (Self-Reported by Respondents, Total Respondents = 732)*

Respondents' highest attained level of education:	Master's (108), PhD (589), Other (35)
Respondents' race: *	First Nations / Indigenous (5), Black (13), Latin (12), Middle Eastern (14), White (550), Asian (48), Mixed Race (25), Prefer not to answer (65)
Respondents' gender identity: **	Woman (383), Man (275), Non-binary/other (24), Prefer not to answer (50)
Whether a respondent is identified as a person with a disability: ***	Yes (82), No (572), Prefer not to answer (78)

* Recoded as White = 0, non-White = 1
** Recoded as Man = 0, Woman = 1, Non-binary/other = 2
*** Recoded as No = 0, Yes = 1
Participants answering "prefer not to answer" are excluded from the regression analysis in Tables 6 to 8.

Table 2. *Survey Questions*

Have you received toxic comments online? * (Yes / No / Prefer not to answer)
How often do you receive toxic comments on your Conversation article(s)? ** (Never / Once / Several times over the past 12 months / At least once every month / At least once every week / Several times every week / Prefer not to answer)
In addition to the Conversation website, have you received toxic comments via other communication channels? Please select all that apply. (Online forums / Social media / Email / Posted mail / Not Applicable / Prefer not to answer)
What is the nature/content of the toxic comments you have received? Please select all that apply. (Skepticism of academic expertise / Appearance / Sexism / Racism / Sexual Orientation / Ideological / Not Applicable / Other / Prefer not to answer)
What is the subject of your article(s) that received toxic comments? Please select all that apply. (Podcasts / COVID-19 / Arts Business + Economy / Culture + Society / Education / Environment + Energy / Health (without COVID-19) / Politics / Science + Tech / Not Applicable / Prefer not to answer)
In terms of the impact of toxic comments, it happens that I: Please select all that apply. (Avoid writing about specific issues because of the risk. / Avoid writing about specific persons/groups because of the risk. / Become afraid of the threats I receive. / Consider not expressing my viewpoint because of the threats I receive. / Chose to stop writing for The Conversation because of the comments I received. / Other / Not Applicable)
Overall, how would you assess the impact of toxic comments on your willingness to participate in knowledge mobilization initiatives outside of The Conversation? *** (They inspired me to work on more knowledge mobilization efforts. / There was no change in my knowledge mobilization efforts. / Neutral / They had minor negative impact on my knowledge mobilization efforts. / They had major negative impact on my knowledge mobilization efforts. / Not Applicable / Prefer not to answer)

* Recoded as No = 0, Yes = 1

** Recoded as Never/Not Applicable = 0, Once = 1, Several Times over Past Month = 2, At least once every month = 3, Several times every week = 4

*** Recoded as Inspired me to do more = −1, Not Applicable/Neutral/No Change = 0, Minor negative impact = 1, Major negative impact = 2

Participants answering “prefer not to answer” are excluded from the regression analysis in Tables 6 to 8.

Overall patterns of harassment targeting Conversation Canada authors

In the survey, a definition of a toxic comment was not provided to respondents. Instead, they were allowed to answer based on their own interpretations. Similarly, we did not define "knowledge mobilization" for respondents. However, as all were scholars, their understanding of this term would be influenced by Canada's major research funding agencies. For example, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2023) defines knowledge mobilization as "an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of activities relating to the production and use of research results, including knowledge synthesis, dissemination, transfer, exchange, and co-creation or co-production by researchers and knowledge users" (para. 4). It is a broad term that covers a wide range of activities.

Table 3 shows the prevalence and severity of toxic comments targeting Conversation Canada authors. Among the 732 respondents to the survey, 27.5% (N = 201) reported having received toxic comments. 45.3% (91 out of 201) of these affected authors received at least several toxic comments within a 12-month period.

Toxic comments are not only confined to The Conversation Canada's article comment section. Among the authors who were targeted, 55.7% (112 out of 201) reported receiving toxic comments on social media, while 39.3% (79 out of 201) mentioned they also received such comments through email. These are worrisome results considering The Conversation Canada's smaller readership in comparison to more established news outlets.[1] Based on survey data we cannot determine where all comments were received, e.g., website versus social media; however, the fact that Conversation readers have to register/cannot remain anonymous when commenting on the site and yet still leave toxic comments, according to editors and authors, is a further sign of the acceptability of such behavior in public discourse. Almost 27% (54 out of 201) of authors targeted by toxic comments reported that online hostility had a minor to significant negative impact on their willingness to participate in knowledge mobilization efforts. By contrast, a smaller portion of these authors, namely 12.9% (26 out of 201), found the hostility to be a catalyst, inspiring them to become more engaged in knowledge mobilization efforts.

Regarding the nature/content of toxic comments targeting Conversation Canada authors, **Table 4** shows that the top three triggers are ideological disagreement (reported by 70.1%, 141 out of 201, of authors who received toxic comments), skepticism of academic expertise (47.3%, 95 out of 201), and gender discrimination (25.4%, 51 out of 201). In line with this trend, the top three types of *Conversation* articles targeted by toxic comments are politics (reported by 32.3%, 65 out of 201, of authors who received toxic comments), culture + society (30.8%, 62 out of 201), and COVID-19 (26.9%, 35 out of 201). As both survey questions permitted multiple responses, the cumulative percentages in Table 4's columns exceed 100%.

As evident in **Table 5**, the most common response to toxic comments among the survey respondents is "to consider not expressing my viewpoint because of the threats I receive" (19.9%, 40 out of 201), followed by "to avoid writing about specific issues because of the risk" (13.4%, 27 out of 201). Further examination of the qualitative responses given by respondents who selected the "other" option reveals negative emotions regarding online toxicity, such as anger, anxiety, contempt, and disappointment.

[1] Noting that Conversation articles can be picked up by multiple outlets and, therefore, may have greater amplification than traditional news outlets in some cases..

Table 3. *The Prevalence and Severity of Toxic Comments*

Have you received toxic comments online?	Yes: 201 No: 521 Prefer not to answer: 10
Only those who answered "Yes" to the first question (N = 201) answered the subsequent questions.	
How often do you receive toxic comments on your Conversation article(s)?	Once: 88 (43.8%) Several times over the past 12 months: 85 (42.3%) At least once every month to several times every week: 6 (3.0%) Never / Not Applicable / Prefer not to answer: 22 (10.9%)
In addition to The Conversation website, have you received toxic comments via other communication channels? (Multiple Choices)	Online forums: 36 (17.9%) Social media: 112 (55.7%) Email: 79 (39.3%) Posted mail: 11 (5.5%) Not applicable: 46 (22.9%)
Overall, how would you assess the impact of toxic comments on your willingness to participate in knowledge mobilization initiatives outside of The Conversation?	They inspired me to work on more knowledge mobilization efforts: 26 (12.9%) There was no change in my knowledge mobilization efforts: 105 (52.2%) Neutral: 15 (7.5%) They had minor negative impact on my knowledge mobilization efforts: 40 (19.9%) They had major negative impact on my knowledge mobilization efforts: 14 (7.0%) Not applicable / Prefer not to answer: 1 (0.5%)

Table 4. *The Nature and Content of Toxic Comments*

Only those who answered "Yes" to the first question (N = 201) answered the subsequent questions.	
What is the nature/content of the toxic comments you have received? (Multiple Choice)	Skepticism of academic expertise: 95 (47.3%) Appearance: 13 (6.5%) Sexism: 44 (21.9%) Racism: 33 (16.4%) Sexual orientation: 7 (3.5%) Ideological: 141 (70.1%) Other: 33 (16.4%)
What is the subject of your article(s) that received toxic comments? (Multiple Choice)	COVID-19: 35 (17.4%) Arts: 5 (2.5%) Business + Economy: 17 (8.5%) Culture + Society: 62 (30.8%) Education: 20 (10%) Environment + Energy: 19 (9.5%) Health (without COVID-19): 28 (13.9%) Politics: 65 (32.3%) Science + Technology: 18 (9.0%) Other: 39 (19.4%)

Table 5. *Impact of Toxic Comments*

Only those who answered "Yes" to the first question (N = 201) answered the subsequent questions.	
In terms of the impact of toxic comments, it happens that I: (Multiple Choice)	Avoid writing about specific issues because of the risk: 27 (13.4%) Avoid writing about specific persons/groups because of the risk: 16 (8.0%) Become afraid of the threats I receive: 19 (9.5%) Consider not expressing my viewpoint because of the threats I receive: 40 (19.9%) Chose to stop writing for The Conversation because of the comments I received: 16 (8.0%) Other: 63 (31.3%) Not applicable: 70 (34.8%)

Table 6. *Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Toxic Comments*

Binary Logistic Regression	**Race** White = 0 Non-White = 1		**Gender** Man = 0 Woman = 1 Non-binary/other = 2		**Disability** No = 0 Yes = 1	
	Coef. (β)	Sig.	Coef. (β)	Sig.	Coef. (β)	Sig.
Have you received toxic comments online? No = 0 Yes = 1	.669	.003*	.189	.256	.665	.010*

Omnibus tests of model coefficients $p < .001$
Hosmer and Lemeshow test $p = .729$
* $p < .05$

Harassment and social identity

To analyze whether social identity might predict Conversation Canada authors' experience of online harassment, we conducted three regression analyses predicting the frequency and severity of toxic comments in relation to gender, race, and disability. A binary logistic regression analysis treating the three variables as predictors (**Table 6**) revealed that authors who are racialized (β=.669, p=.003) or people with disabilities (β=.665, p=.010) are more likely to encounter toxic comments. The Omnibus tests of model coefficients for this analysis rejected the null hypothesis (p<.001), indicating that at least one predictor variable is meaningfully related to the outcome variable. Additionally, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test for this analysis (p=.729) was consistent with the null hypothesis, indicating that the model fits the data well.

In subsequent analysis, the strongest predictor of toxic comments turned out to be race. An ordinal logistic regression analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between the frequency of toxic comments and the three predictor variables, as shown in **Table 7**. The analysis found a statistically significant association between the frequency of toxic comments and "being White" (p=0.007). As indicated by the negative coefficient (β=−.609), being White is associated with experiencing a lower frequency of toxic comments. The analysis' model fitting rejected the null hypothesis (p=.011), indicating that at least one of the predictors in the model is relevant. Additionally, its goodness-of-fit tests were consistent with the null hypothesis (Pearson p=.299, Deviance p=.751), indicating that there is no significant difference between the observed and expected frequencies, and the model fits the data well.

Another ordinal logistic regression analysis investigating the relationship between the impact of toxic comments and the three predictor variables (**Table 8**) identified "Man = 0" as statistically significant (p=.042), and the negative coefficient (β=-1.293) suggested that being male is associated with a less significant effect of toxic comments on knowledge mobilization (when creating dummy variables, "Major negative impact" was coded as "2"). However, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution since the model fitting of this analysis failed to reject the null hypothesis (p = .285), and one of its goodness-of-fit tests (Pearson Chi-Square p = .004) also indicated a poor fit between the model and the data. Put differently, there is evidence to suggest men appear less likely to be affected by toxic comments in terms of their willingness to participate in knowledge mobilization. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously as further research is required to confirm it.

Table 7. *Ordinal Logistic Regression Predicting Toxic Comments (I)*

Ordinal Logistic Regression	How often do you receive toxic comments on your Conversation article(s)? No/Not Applicable = 0 Once = 1 Several times over past month = 2 At least once every month = 3 Several times per week = 4	
	Coef. (β)	Sig.
Race		
White = 0	-.609	.007*
Non-White = 1	0[a]	0
Gender		
Man = 0	-.503	.269
Woman = 1	-.357	.449
Non-binary/other = 2	0[a]	0
Disability		
No = 0	-.502	.060
Yes = 1	0[a]	0

* $p < .05$
Model fitting $p = .011$
Goodness-of-fit: Pearson $p = .299$, Deviance $p = .751$

Table 8. *Ordinal Logistic Regression Predicting Toxic Comments (II)*

Ordinal Logistic Regression	Overall, how would you assess the impact of toxic comments on your willingness to participate in knowledge mobilization initiatives outside of The Conversation? Inspired me to do more = -1 Not applicable/neutral/no change = 0 Minor negative impact = 1 Major negative impact = 2	
	Coef. (β)	Sig.
Race		
White = 0	-.131	.703
Non-White = 1	0[a]	0
Gender		
Man = 0	-1.293	.042*
Woman = 1	-.909	.140
Non-binary/other = 2	0[a]	0
Disability		
No = 0	.385	.360
Yes = 1	0[a]	0

* p < .05
Model fitting p = .285
Goodness-of-fit: Pearson p = .004, Deviance p = .071

Insights from semi-structured interviews

Interviews allowed for further contextualization of the experience of Conversation authors related to toxic interactions, and the subsequent impact. Eleven of 37 authors (all of whom had published on the English site) discussed receiving toxic comments. Authors who identified as being the target of toxicity largely pinpointed the subject of their articles, versus who they were, as the reason for being targeted.

Consistent with data gathered in the survey, many of the authors who had received toxic comments did not receive them directly on The Conversation website. As noted by one, "Every time I write for The Conversation I've got harassment emails, right. I have become really good with it. I have a spam folder" (Author 14, personal communication, March 8, 2023).

Having the comments turned off on articles that were deemed more likely to attract negative attention did not prevent toxic interactions:

> There was a lot of bullying and the editor I worked with was really great, because, she said, like we can turn off comments at any time. But you know it was because we're public-facing; even when you turn off the comments on The Conversation, my email is readily available. So I got a lot of yeah, just like Twitter messages, Facebook direct messages and emails that were really negative and a lot of hatred and bullying. (Author 25, personal communication, April 17, 2022)

Two of five Conversation editors interviewed gave perspectives on managing toxic comments when asked about the experience of authors, noting that negative online interactions are common and increasingly unavoidable. For example:

> More and more it's like, especially our editors in the Culture and Society section where they're dealing with race and Indigenous issues, especially if they're first-time authors, the editors are talking to them to say you need to be prepared to, this is going to happen, you know. We will help when we can, but you need to acknowledge that it's a risk, right?" (Editor 1, personal communication, October 21, 2022)

Ignoring/trying to avoid toxic comments was the most common strategy used by the authors we spoke with. However, several noted they were unsure how best to manage toxic interactions and thought there should be more guidance.

Others responded to negative comments with links to additional reports and papers to support the evidence cited in their articles. As described by one author: "They were personal . . . We just got roasted by some of the comments, but we gave as good as we got . . . I quoted over 200 different citations [to support claims in the article]" (Author 6, personal communication, November 18, 2022).

Even for those who welcomed debate on their articles and who were comfortable engaging with harsh critics, things could go too far:

> It's not like as academics, we're afraid to have tough conversations, and have new ideas kind of brought forth to us, but when attacks get personal, attacks get toxic and when they try to shut you down as a professional, which has happened to me, that's where I think things sort of crossed the line." (Author 2, personal communication, September 11, 2022)

However, most authors believed that toxic comments were to be expected in any online interaction. As noted by one, "This is, I think, part of the broader media system, but you can't get away from it. It's actually not something related to The Conversation. It's just something that exists online" (Author 5, personal communication, November 17, 2022).

Some authors who had not received what they perceived to be toxic comments, and even a few who did, said they thought participating in dialogue on The Conversation site was worthwhile, and that it was beneficial to engage with the audience. Others found comments on the site to be better/more positive compared to other media organizations where they had published articles. An author who published on the French site described interactions with readers as "cordial" (Author 35, personal communication, June 3, 2023).

Editors noted a lingering sense of responsibility towards supporting authors and preventing toxic comments: "I do revisit stories to consider if there is anything that could have been done differently or something I might or should have addressed with

the author" (Editor 4, personal communication, January 9, 2023). Many authors interviewed noted that more media training would be welcome. The Conversation's policy at the time of this study was to provide none; according to interviews, it was considered the responsibility of cooperating universities to arrange such support for authors. However, the editor who revisited stories thought there was room to do more in relation to toxic interactions:

> Likely, it would be a good direction for The Conversation to explore teaming up with researchers . . . to examine online harassment and university communities who have published stories with us—to offer a panel or, I have even thought, some kind of mutual mentoring support to authors involved in public intellectual life. (Editor 4, personal communication, January 9, 2023)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In today's increasingly polarized society, many public figures contend with an increasingly hostile online environment. In the case of journalists, previous research has shown that women, those who are racialized, and those covering contentious topics (e.g., structural inequality and racism) are more likely to be targeted by anti-press hostility (Miller, 2021a; Lewis et al., 2020; Waisbord, 2020, 2022a). In comparison, the experiences of academic authors writing for journalistic outlets have received less scholarly attention. These authors may not be "journalists" but they are writing in journalistic spaces where their presence and research is amplified to a wider audience using a journalistic style, under the banner of a "news" organization. To address this research gap, we investigated how Conversation Canada authors experience toxic comments using a combination of survey and interview data.

Our analysis paints a concerning picture. It suggests that toxic comments pose a notable challenge to The Conversation Canada's journalism practice, as a sizable proportion of authors have encountered them and commenting norms have been changed to control them. The impact of these toxic comments is by no means trivial. According to survey data, they have a chilling effect, causing a number of the affected authors to avoid expressing their viewpoints (19.9%) or writing about certain topics (13.4%), as well as to reconsider their knowledge mobilization efforts (26.9%), thereby fostering an atmosphere of self-censorship. Such findings support news industry demands for serious efforts to curb anti-press hostility (Fenlon, 2022). While this research was under review, The Conversation Canada held a workshop at the annual gathering of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, focusing on strategies for dealing with online harassment. Discussions during the workshop emphasized peer support and collective advocacy to encourage universities to establish policies that support faculty members in handling online hostility.

RQ1 focused on the frequency and severity of toxic comments directed at Conversation Canada authors. As reported in the previous section, 27.5% of survey respondents have encountered toxic comments. Among the respondents who experienced harassment, 45.3% reported receiving multiple toxic comments within a 12-month period. Meanwhile, 26.9% of the respondents who experienced harassment considered toxic comments as having a negative impact on their enthusiasm for knowledge mobilization.

At first glance, these results suggest that hostility directed at Conversation Canada authors may not be as severe or frequent as that directed at professional journalists surveyed in previous research (e.g., Lewis et al., 2020; Lofgren Nilsson & Ornebring, 2016; Miller, 2021; Stahel & Schoen, 2020). However, two factors must be considered. First, as many academics contribute to websites like The Conversation Canada out of a passion for knowledge mobilization rather than a job necessity, toxic comments can prompt them to reconsider the priority of public writing in their work routines, negatively impacting public discourse.

Second, as mentioned previously, The Conversation Canada's exclusive focus on articles supported by academic evidence is meant to attract readers interested in engaging in constructive conversations with scholars. For this purpose, the website requires readers to register with an email address or other online credentials before posting

a comment. Despite this preventative measure, many authors continue to be the target of toxic comments, as evidenced by the findings. As of May 2025, The Conversation Canada website maintains the policy of closing the comment section for selected articles, underscoring the fact that toxic comments remain a major operational challenge.

RQ2 investigated the triggering factors for toxic comments. The survey explored the relationship between three visible markers of social identity (gender, race, and disability) and the frequency of toxic comments, as well as Conversation Canada authors' responses. According to the regression analysis results, race is a significant variable in predicting the frequency of receiving toxic comments, followed by disability (Tables 6 & 7). Compared with many previous studies that emphasized the disproportionate impact of online harassment on women journalists (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Miller & Lewis, 2022; Tandoc et al., 2021), the current analysis found no statistically significant correlation between gender and the predicted frequency of receiving toxic comments. This could support authors' perceptions that, in some cases, it is the subject of articles that is more likely to attract toxic comments. This could also, perhaps, be unique to The Conversation's environment, which some authors noted was comparatively more civil than other publishing environments.

Table 8 shows a statistically significant correlation between gender and responses to toxic comments; however, this finding requires cautious interpretation, given the unsatisfactory model fitting and goodness-of-fit results. While male authors were less likely to change their behavior in response to online harassment, echoing previous findings in studies such as Miller (2023b), and Stahel and Schoen (2020), women were more likely to change behavior to avoid such interactions. This is not unexpected, given that comments targeted at women are often severe, violent, and personal (Poestti & Bonchetva, 2022). However, it is greatly concerning in terms of mitigating the ability of women academics/journalists to interact with the public (which, as noted previously, might impact career opportunities) and limiting the voices of women in online discourse, in general. This is another area requiring future research.

How should these findings be interpreted? The content of toxic comments and the specific articles they target, as reported by survey respondents, provide important clues. The top three triggers for toxic comments are ideological disagreement, skepticism towards academic expertise, and gender discrimination. The Conversation Canada sections most frequently targeted by toxic comments are politics, culture and society, and COVID-19. Overall, these results suggest the majority of toxic comments directed at Conversation Canada authors are politically motivated attacks on their expertise and standpoints, which, according to Miller's (2023b) classification of various forms of harassment, belong to "incivility and disruptive harassment" that attacks the authors' identity as public intellectuals (p. 200).

Accordingly, the anti-press and online hostility targeting The Conversation Canada is indicative of mob censorship (Waisbord, 2020), which results from the combination of three developments: "easy public access to public figures (e.g., journalists and academics), the presence of toxic internet right-wing and far-right cultures, and populist demonization of the mainstream press" (p. 1037). Mob censorship exemplifies a worrying trend on the internet, namely that intensifying populism and political polarization lead to an upsurge in the prevalence of harmful discourses over constructive ones. This situation underscores the importance of restoring the collective well-being and democratic health on digital platforms.

RQ3 examined the responses of Conversation Canada authors to toxic interactions. It is concerning to discover that 26.9% of authors who have experienced online harassment viewed toxic comments as having a negative impact on their interest in sharing knowledge. Nonetheless, based on interviews, neither The Conversation Canada nor the authors' affiliated universities provided adequate organizational support for dealing with toxic comments at the time of data collection. Often, authors were left on their own to figure out how best to manage comments, particularly those arriving outside of the website. Based on interviews, these efforts required significant time and emotional labour. Given the growing demand

from funding agencies for researchers to engage in knowledge mobilization activities, universities must urgently develop resources and policies that support scholars who seek psychological or legal assistance due to experiencing severe online harassment that can be amplified because of their visibility in news publications with resulting exposure to a wider audience. Existing resources that identify best practices for dealing with online harassment in a journalism context could be adapted for this purpose (e.g., Bedei, 2024; McGregor, Vilk, & Mohamed, 2024), and such adaptation would be a valuable area of future research.

In summation, this study promotes a more nuanced understanding of anti-press hostility, demonstrating that even those who occasionally contribute to journalistic outlets are subject to it. The rise of mob censorship as a significant obstacle to the daily operations of media startups such as The Conversation Canada is alarming, as such independent media rely on academics and other non-journalists for content but lack the means to protect them from anti-press hostility. The study's findings also echo recent research on digital media criticism (Carlson et al., 2021; Cheruiyot, 2022; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), showing that toxic comments, driven by cynicism towards journalism and authority, actively attempt to undermine the epistemic legitimacy of journalism and question its social function.

Therefore, it is crucial that governments, digital platforms, news media, and other stakeholders work together to shield the press, and those contributing to the press who may not be "journalists," from digital hostility. "Only if mob censorship is recognized across the board as a collective, social problem, rather than a series of unfortunate events affecting individual reporters, it would [sic (would it)] be possible to envision effective responses to online violence" (Waisbord, 2023, p. 1767).

The prevalence of cross-platform toxicity underscores the need for a balanced approach to content moderation. While the decision of The Conversation Canada to close the comment section for certain articles is understandable, it may result in the loss of the opportunity to contain negative interactions within a specific environment, which increases the overall burden of harassment experienced by academics elsewhere. Thus, it is essential to consider how comment policies can impact not only the immediate discourse on news websites but also the broader implications for authors' experiences online.

This study has limitations. Due to the focus of the survey and interviews on the experiences of Conversation Canada authors, the findings cannot be generalized to countries with different media cultures or all inhabitants of the field of journalism. We also recognize that some authors received toxic comments that were unrelated to their race, gender, or disabilities. The regression analyses presented in Tables 6 to 8 reveal limited explanatory power, suggesting that the interplay of toxic comments and social identity markers does not fully account for digital hostility. In addition, the study gave limited consideration to the coping strategies employed by Conversation Canada authors in the face of mob censorship. In light of these limitations, future research may adopt a comparative design to investigate how academics experience anti-press and online hostility in different countries or conduct in-depth, broader interviews to determine how academics at different career stages view the benefits and drawbacks of writing for the media. For example, are pre-tenure or contract faculty more likely to risk harassment for the perceived benefit of career advancement?

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Author Contributions
Sibo Chen and Nicole Blanchett conceived and designed this study, while working in a larger research team for a broader project. The original dataset was collected by the Explanatory Journalism project at Toronto Metropolitan University. Sibo Chen conducted the statistical analysis, while Nicole Blanchett led data collection for interviews with selected survey respondents, analysis of interview data, and wrote relevant content related to qualitative data in the manuscript. Sibo Chen drafted the rest of the initial manuscript, and the subsequent revisions of the manuscript were completed collectively by Sibo Chen and Nicole Blanchett. S. Lecourt conducted the study's French interviews and translated them into English, and assisted with preliminary analysis of qualitative data.

Data Availability
The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to research ethics requirements but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical Approval
The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Toronto Metropolitan University (file number 2022-138).

Informed Consent
Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants.

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Making it 'Local': Community data journalism for health justice

Rendre 'Locale' : un cas de journalisme de données en service du justice en matière de santé communautaire

Shirley Roburn

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a multi-modal case study of the journalism of The Local, a new journalism start-up with a health equity mandate, during six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicate that The Local's reporting had a concrete, meaningful impact in improving health equity outcomes in COVID-19 public health efforts in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) during the time period studied. The Local accomplished this using a unique approach. The Local's Code of Ethics and its Race, Representation and Equity Commitment shaped the magazine's structure, which in turn influenced reporting. The Local applied a health-equity lens to its pandemic data journalism. It followed up on the health inequities which surfaced by having racialized journalists, representative of the communities they serve, pursue deep features, often with a solutions journalism approach.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: community journalism, health justice, data journalism, journalism start-up, hyperlocal journalism, pandemic reporting, COVID-19 communication, alternative media, digital journalism, race in journalism

Mots-clés : journalisme d'engagement, jeune entreprise de journalisme, journalisme hyperlocal, reportage sur les pandémies, communication COVID-19, médias alternatifs, journalisme numérique, race dans le journalisme

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente une étude du journalisme de The Local, une jeune entreprise de journalisme numérique axée sur l'égalité des chances en matière de santé, durant les six mois de la pandémie de COVID-19. Les résultats indiquent que les reportages de The Local ont eu un impact concret et important sur l'amélioration des résultats d'équité en santé dans le cadre des efforts de santé publique liés à la pandémie de COVID-19 dans la grande région de Toronto pendant la période étudiée. The Local a accompli cela grâce à une approche unique. Le code d'éthique de The Local et ses engagements en matière de race, de représentation et d'équité, ont influencé la structure du revue, ce qui a ensuite influencé les reportages. The Local a appliqué une perspective d'équité en santé à son journalisme de données au sujet de la pandémie. Le périodique a suivi les inégalités en santé que ce journalisme a éclairé par des reportages approfondis, souvent avec une approche de journalisme de solutions, réaliser par des journalistes racialisés, représentatifs des communautés qu'ils servent.

INTRODUCTION

According to The Local News Research project, the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada was directly responsible for the permanent shuttering of 44 community newspapers and the temporary closing of fifteen more (Lindgren et al., 2020). It also led to a decline in alternative weeklies, and an increase in papers shifting all or some of their editions to online only. A rare bright spot in the pandemic journalistic landscape has been an increase in online digital news startups.

Since the 2010s, journalism scholars have turned their attention to digital news start-ups globally, including studies in North America (Callison & Young, 2020; Schaffer 2010, 2013), Europe (Bruno & Nielsen 2012; Usher 2017), Asia (Wu, 2023), and Australia and New Zealand (Simons 2013; Downman & Murray, 2018). As Downman and Murray (2018) highlight, emergent digital journalisms come in many forms, including "niche journalism, participatory journalism, citizen journalism, alternative journalism, slow journalism, geosocial journalism, engaged journalism, reciprocal journalism – the list goes on" (p.1). Although new journalism start-ups are playing an increasingly vital role in the overall journalism landscape, research into the subset of journalism start-ups that centre data journalism is relatively scant (Wu, 2023), and even scarcer when one focuses on community or local journalism start-ups with a social purpose mandate, as opposed to for-profit start-ups.

This paper shares results from the second phase of a multi-modal research project concerning the impact that one particular health justice focused community digital journalism startup, quarterly magazine The Local, had in spring and summer of 2021. As COVID-19 vaccinations began to be made available to the general population across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), The Local focused its data journalism and feature reporting on inequities in the vaccination rollout, and how these played out in poorer health outcomes in underserved neighbourhoods. Through social media analysis, news content analysis, and interviews, the research aimed to determine if and how The Local had an impact on pandemic health outcomes in the GTA.

The Local's reporting exerted appreciable influence in several ways. Its clear, consistent data-driven animations and graphics of neighbourhood level inequalities in pandemic health outcomes supported elected officials and public health bureaucrats to take a health justice focused approach to the COVID-19 vaccination rollout. Its Hot Spot Tracker directly influenced the choices of local officials responsible for locating and operating COVID-19 vaccination clinics. Finally, the expanded reach of The Local's award-winning deep dive features on the experiences of the pandemic in underserved neighbourhoods, framed from a social determinants of health perspective, correlates with mainstream papers increasing their reporting on these communities, and shifting their narratives towards a greater focus on health equity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 and declining community news coverage

The alarming decline of local and community newspaper coverage in Canada in recent decades is commonly constructed as an economic and technological crisis (Shattered Mirror, 2017), as well as a crisis of concentration of ownership (Winseck, 2017). Daily newspaper advertising revenue declined by half in the decade beginning in 2006; concomitantly, amalgamation of media outlets brought more than half of major Canadian dailies under a single company, Postmedia. Thousands of job cuts have augured a decline in the diversity and depth of local news coverage, which was subsequently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These patterns are in keeping with the pandemic's impact on journalism globally, in which local and community news has been particularly hard hit (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Quandt and Wahl-Jorgenson (2021) argue that the pandemic acted as a *critical moment* for journalism, challenging the relevance of existing business models and throwing into sharp relief the challenges and changes facing the journalism industry and the climate it operates within.

Crisis as opportunity: the rise of digital news start-ups and data journalism

Rather than just crisis, Quandt and Wahl-Jorgenson also frame this critical moment as a time of opportunity and transformation, noting the rise of both new journalism start-ups and the field of data journalism. Journalism research has aimed to catalogue emergent data visualization practices, and what niches data journalists and data journalism are carving out within newsrooms (Wu, 2023; Widholm & Appelgren, 2022; Engebretsen, Kennedy, Weber, 2018; Young, Hermida & Fulda, 2018). For example, studies indicate that during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, data journalism "rendered COVID-19's potential developments accessible to policy makers and the public" (Pentzold et al., 2021, p. 1367), engaging readers with updated scientific and public health information and presenting sophisticated modelling in formats digestible to the lay person. Recent work highlights how the pandemic instigated a leveling up in the overall quality and pervasiveness of data journalism in newsrooms (Kirk, 2024), and ushered in changes in practice as data journalism became more integrated in the day-to-day of journalism (Tong, 2024).

As digital data revolutionizes everything from online platforms, to marketing, to science and engineering, journalism researchers are probing larger questions about how data visualization and data journalism alter the people, places, processes, and products of news making (Hermida & Young, 2019; Bounegru & Gray, 2021). Germane to this case study, attention is increasingly focused on how data science and data mapping take place within matrices of power where intersectionality shapes impacts on particular populations. Theorists argue variously for new forms of data feminism (Tacheva, 2022; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020), Indigenous data sovereignty (Walter et al. 2020), and other intersectional approaches to counter algorithmic bias (Chun, 2021; Buolamwini, 2023). Academics, activists, and journalism professionals seek to apply data collection and visualization methods, including those of data journalism, that can reveal inequality and concretize social justice disparities in accessible graphics and maps (Jeppesen & Sartoretto, 2023; Lowan-Trudeau, 2021; Appelgren, 2019).

Since the 2010s, a developing body of work has analyzed the growth of digital news start-ups globally, even as many legacy news outlets are in decline (Bruno & Nielsen 2012; Callison & Young, 2020; Downman & Murray, 2018; Schaffer, 2010, 2013; Simons, 2013; Usher, 2017; Wu, 2023). In Canada, the proliferation of digital news start-ups offers a rare bright spot in the snapshots of declining local and community newspaper outlets documented by The Local News Research Project since 2018[1]. As Callison and Young (2020) note, compared to their legacy news competitors, these relatively recent digital start-ups "actively work(s) to extend and experiment with economic models, partner with non-journalists, and privilege underserved, feminist, and diverse perspectives" (p.141). In 2020, as part of measures to address the collapse of journalism in Canada, the Canadian government made changes to tax law to certify "Registered Journalism Organizations" as not-for-profit entities that receive some of the tax benefits of charities, including the ability to issue charitable donation receipts (which give tax breaks to recipients). *The Narwhal* and The Local, the first organizations to receive this new designation, are both journalism start-ups that, fitting with Callison and Young's (2020) findings, are experimenting with different mixes of revenue sources in search of a sustainable economic model.

Callison and Young (2020) also emphasize that relatively little journalism research responds to, or foregrounds, "persistent critiques related to gender, race, indigeneity and colonialism," (p. 5), although they argue that these critiques are necessary to understanding and addressing declining journalism readership. Yet one of the differences between legacy media and much of the subset of small Canadian journalism start-ups is that these start-ups often have mandates and organizational practices that respond to such critiques, despite an overall tendency for the mainstream digital journalism space to reproduce employment precarity and exclusions along racial and gendered lines (Cohen & Clarke, 2024).

[1] The Local News Research Project website (https://localnewsresearchproject.ca/) documents the state of local news in Canada through multiple means, including a variety of "news maps," various written publications and newspaper articles, and downloadable data.

Community and social-purpose digital news start-ups

Taking a comparative international perspective, Motta (2022) documents robust support networks built by community journalism start-ups, sometimes in partnership with major funders, that provide different forms of assistance, from funding to trainings to technology and even financial planning services, specifically for outlets by and for marginalized communities. Motta also notes that, catalyzed by broader changes to journalism practice and markets during the pandemic, community based digital journalism start-ups have turned to "constructive" and solutions-based approaches as part of a paradigmatic shift arising partially from a more engaged approach that forged closer ties to communities and audiences.

If researchers such as Motta (2022), and Callison and Young (2020) are correct, digital journalism start-ups with a social purpose and/or marginalized community focus are qualitatively different from mainstream journalism not only in their makeup and mandate, but in their day-to-day journalistic practice. What does this mean in terms of data journalism? How might data journalism be enacted differently, and have different impacts, as it is practiced within the context of small social purpose digital journalism start-ups? This case study broaches these questions through an in-depth study of the impact of the pandemic health justice reporting of one such digital news start-up, The Local.

Specific context

It is necessarily to touch briefly upon the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario, in order to understand how the media, and specifically The Local, could have an impact on vaccination policy in the time period studied. Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) lay out in detail the health systems, policies, and chains of command that governed the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations as they first became available in Ontario. Germane to this discussion,

> Pandemic-management decisions, including vaccine rollout, were led by a combination of public health officials, political leaders, and logistics and leadership committees; however, as evidenced by the composition of Ontario's COVID-19 Vaccination Distribution Task Force, there was no public health involvement in this leadership and no members with public health expertise (Ontario, 2020d). (Fitzpatrick et al., p. 29)

In practice, the Premier and cabinet were closely involved in high-level decision making, and decisions reflected a political calculus. One illustrative example is the Office of the Premier's announcement in April 2021 of measures to shut down children's playgrounds and give police "arbitrary powers" (Nasser & Powers, 2021) to stop, question, and fine anyone outdoors. These measures were rescinded less than 24 hours later due to political backlash. Reporter Mike Crawley (2021) concluded that the government was "not acting on recommendations from the science table—such as mandating paid sick days and paring back the list of essential workplaces—while imposing measures no health advisers had actually recommended," due to its internal polling indicating a need to be seen taking action (para. 15). This episode illustrates that the government was sensitive to public pressure, but also to business interests concerned about negative economic impacts from pandemic measures. The government response to the pharmacy desert controversy (discussed later) illustrates a similar dynamic: in response to public pressure, the second phase of the pharmacy vaccine pilot specifically targeted virus "hot spots" in Toronto and Peel (Robertson, 2021). However the government did not take up advice from the Ontario Pharmacists Association that there be a more equitable split to include vaccinations being allotted to independently owned pharmacies rather than to large chain pharmacies largely owned by Loblaws, a company that the Canada Health Coalition has repeatedly accused of cozying up to governments in order to forward plans to have more of health care activities (such as vaccinations) outsourced and privatized (Van Horne, 2024; Dowson, 2024).

In this context, public health officials working within existing structures were in a difficult position: the default position of government on pandemic health measures often differed from what public health science and policy would

consider best practice. Yet to speak out strongly could easily backfire, both by politicizing issues further rather than pulling policy back towards public health perspectives, and by compromising a speaker's employment if the speaker was seen by their employers as not respecting the sensitivities of their position. A more effective corrective, as occurred with the playgrounds directive, was pressure, whether public pressure or pressure from constituencies the government wished to keep on side. In the case of vaccination, public pressure was needed not only to have equity measures enacted, but to ensure the government continued to prioritize vulnerable populations and communities rather than reverting to an 'equal' allotments of vaccination doses that did not take into consideration that some populations were much more at risk than others. It was also required to support the involvement of the public health apparatus, and its expertise, in the initial campaign when vaccines became available (rather than, for example, for-profit pharmacies being the main conveyor of vaccines). However, at the outset of the January to June 2021 time period of this study, dominant narratives in pandemic news reporting tended to support the status quo (Loreto, 2021), rather than mainstream news taking a more critical role in interrogating public health implications of specific government policies.

In contrast, pandemic equity concerns easily fit within the core mandate of The Local, launched in May of 2019 as an independent online quarterly magazine after two years of incubation at OpenLab, a healthcare innovation studio within Canada's largest research and teaching hospital network. The Local originated as a storytelling project designed to foreground social determinants of health concerns to health policy decision makers by giving voice to "neglected voices of Toronto's diverse neighbourhoods" (OpenLab, n.d.). In the words of Executive Editor Nick Hune-Brown,

> when the pandemic started, it felt like, all of a sudden, our interest was the only story in the globe, like, what social determinants make your health worse, that was the story of the pandemic. So everyone was writing in our territory. (personal communication, August 25, 2022)

METHOD

An earlier paper (Chen & Roburn, 2025) reports on the first phase of this multi-modal study of The Local's coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out in the GTA in the spring and summer of 2021. This thematic analysis of tweets by the magazine's official accounts and The Local's key journalists found that The Local took "a unique journalistic approach that prioritized hyper-local, data-informed, and affective storytelling over the traditional norm of journalists as detached observers and information providers" (Chen & Roburn, 2025). This second phase of the study focuses on qualitative methods to further probe this journalistic approach at a more granular level. A further quantitative element, detailed later, emerged to follow up on one conclusion from the interview process. Additionally, in follow-up interviews The Local provided both precise quantitative data on website and social media traffic, and written documentation backing up its claims of impact on the vaccination roll-out in Toronto. In this case study, circulation figures are expressed as ratios or in general terms in order to keep proprietary data confidential. Similarly, private communications shared with this researcher are only discussed in the most general of terms, with the focus on the material from the interviews as the main elaboration of these points.

Research questions included:

Q1. What were the key characteristics of The Local's pandemic reporting?

Q2. What role did The Local's reporting and the work of The Local's reporters play in reframing debates about the COVID-19 vaccination rollout? Did The Local's reporting impact the journalism landscape and mainstream reporting in the GTA?

Q3. What can we learn about how The Local had influence: how did The Local's journalism reach different constituencies?

Q4. What does the case study of The Local highlight as far as what is needed to support a more diverse community journalism landscape in Canada?

Between September 2022 and May 2023, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted over videoconferencing software. The interview process was approved by York University's Office of Research Ethics. Interviewees included staff of The Local, other journalists, and a selection of influential officials (elected and appointed) and critics involved in Toronto's vaccine rollout in 2021 (**Table 1**).

Table 1. *Interviewee Breakdown*

Category	Female	Male
Local journalists/ editor	1	2
Other journalists	4	2
Health justice advocates and government officials	3	3

The Local's Editor-in-Chief, Executive Editor, and reporter Fatima Syed, who wrote two influential long-form features about the pandemic and vaccination campaign in Peel region, were interviewed. Other reporters who were solicited for interviews were either health or data journalism-focused reporters at major mainstream Canadian news outlets (two newspapers and the CBC, Canada's public broadcaster), with an effort made to include racialized reporters and women. Locating an appropriate selection of health-focused officials and health justice critics began with observing which officials and health advocates interacted with The Local's tweets. However, it quickly became evident that focusing on the amount of interaction with The Local tweets analyzed in the first phase of the study reproduced biases by under-representing women and minorities, who were less likely to be vocal on Twitter (now called X) on a highly politicized topic, due to the disproportionate level of threats, harassment, and hate that research demonstrates these groups face on online platforms (Lingiardi et al., 2020; Mirrlees, 2021; Gillespie, 2018).[2] Additionally, those with official roles in the vaccination rollout also limited their interactions over Twitter. Snowball sampling was instead used to help identify appropriate officials. The sampling of health justice advocates drew from people who had a Twitter presence and interacted with The Local, but rather than focus on those who interacted the most, the sampling included racialized people and women who had an overall lower interaction level on Twitter, but substantive public communicative activities through other forums, such as mainstream media or, in the case of the Gritty Nurses, their own podcast. Half of the health justice advocates identified as racialized either publicly or during the interview.

Interviews ranged from 20 to 78 minutes in length, averaging 50 minutes long. Participants were asked about: their professional experience during the pandemic; their experiences of media coverage of the pandemic and of the 2021 vaccination campaign; their knowledge and impressions of The Local and of The Local's pandemic coverage, including specific Local infographics and feature reports; and, for those involved in media, suggestions they had for government supports and policy to foster a more robust local journalism landscape. Three interview templates were used to solicit input on these themes, with some question framing varying for The Local journalists, for other journalists, and for those active in the health justice field. For example, health justice advocates were asked about their roles as communicators during the pandemic, while journalists were asked about their role as media producers.

Interviews were coded based on thematic analysis, a method that derives critical understanding of underlying themes through open-ended, inductive analysis (Hawkins, 2018; Braun 2019). This approach is described in more detail in Chen and Roburn (2025) as it pertained to the initial, social media focused phase of the research. For the interviews phase, codes were determined through an iterative process by the author and a research assistant. Relevant passages were grouped and reviewed within a given code,

[2] In Canada, anti-vaccination discourse became an important talking point for the far right, leading to convoys of truckers blocking a border crossing and taking over the streets of Ottawa for several weeks. See https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/key-events-canadas-trucker-protests-against_covid-curbs-2022-02-19/ and https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/how-american-right-wing-funding-for-canadian-trucker-protests-could-sway-u-s-politics. For the role of Russia in stoking these protests over social media, see https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v5i3.5101.

with the text analyzed by this author for key points of agreement and disagreement, and the relative prominence of themes.

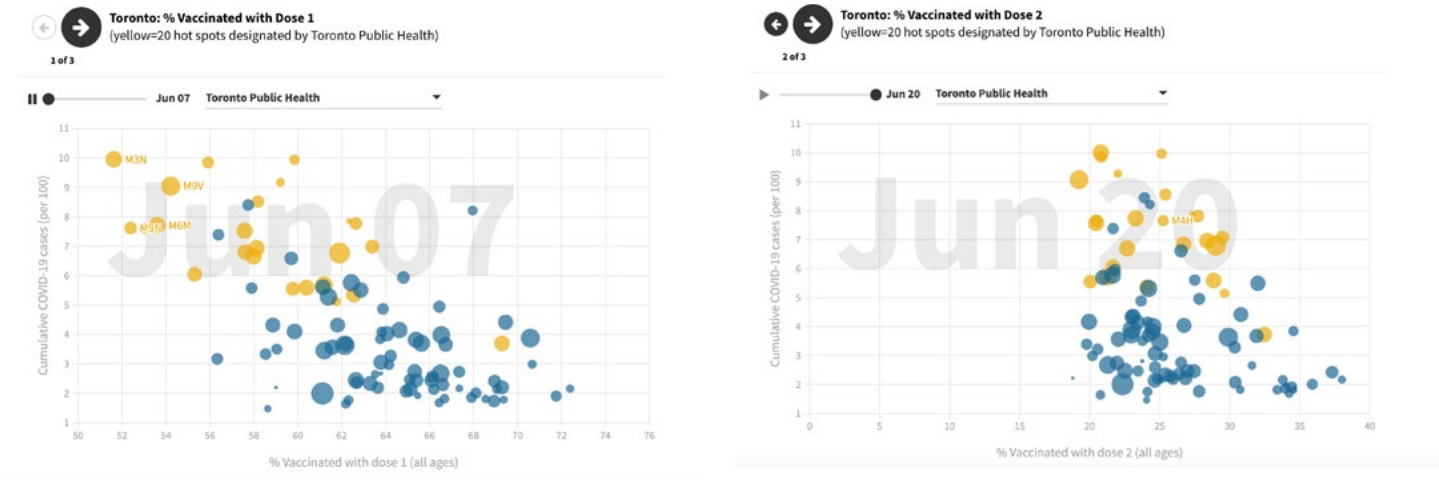
A key finding, repeated by multiple interviewees, was the claim that The Local's feature report "You Can't Stop the Spread of the Virus if You Don't Stop it in Peel" by Fatima Syed, published on April 22, 2021, was a watershed moment that shifted media coverage of the pandemic in the GTA towards a greater focus on health equity and on how the pandemic was impacting poorer, racialized neighbourhoods mainly located outside the city core. This finding was investigated through collecting pandemic news coverage in *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* for six weeks before and six weeks after April 22, 2021, and comparing articles by length and using frame analysis (Winslow, 2017), to see if there were differences in the amount and type of coverage of the pandemic in Peel region before and after Syed's Local feature.

FINDINGS

The Local's reporting had a meaningful impact in improving health equity outcomes in COVID-19 public health efforts in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) during the time period studied. Evidence of this impact will be discussed in this section. Thematic findings, many of which illustrate the why and how of this impact, are offered in following sections.

The Local's impact was twofold. Firstly, The Local's coverage influenced government and public health officials in their policy choices. Discussing the rollout of the City of Toronto's COVID-19 vaccination campaign, City Councillor Joe Cressy, the Chair of the Toronto Board of Health, and member of the City of Toronto's COVID-19 Strategic Command Team[3] and Immunization Task Force, described that The Local "played a pretty important role from a data led, evidence-based standpoint in highlighting inequities, in helping to spur governments to address them." This perspective was further affirmed by an anonymous interviewee with high-level roles on various tables charged with developing and implementing vaccination policy in Toronto. This interviewee described The Local's Hot Spot Tracker, regularly disseminated over Twitter, and viewed by tens of thousands,[4] as "kickstart(ing) the conversation" in support of what became known as the Sprint strategy, a vaccine equity program launched in Toronto to allocate and deliver vaccination doses to disadvantaged neighbourhoods (personal communication, February 24, 2023). The animated Tracker graphed cumulative COVID-19 cases (y-axis) against the percentage population with a first vaccination dose in each forward sortation area (defined by the first three letters and numbers of

Figure 1. *The Local's Hot Spot Tracker images, June 7 and June 20, 2021*



[3] The Strategic Command Team was tasked with coordinating the city-wide response to the pandemic.

[4] The Local shared that the total viewership over the Tracker's active lifetime was equivalent to the viewership for an entire multi-story regular edition of The Local. The Tracker also circulated widely through being heavily featured in Tai Huynh's personal Twitter feed—raw data from the earlier social media analysis phase of this project showed 13 of his 100 most like Tweets discussed hot spots, with several linking directly to the Tracker.

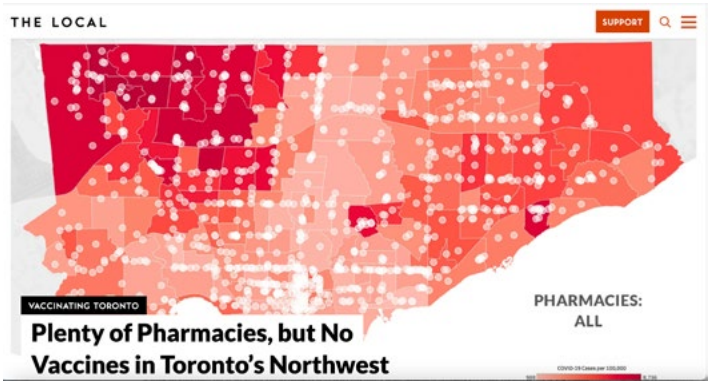
a postal code), with the data points being coloured either yellow for those that were designated 'hot spots' by Toronto public health, or blue (**Figure 1**).

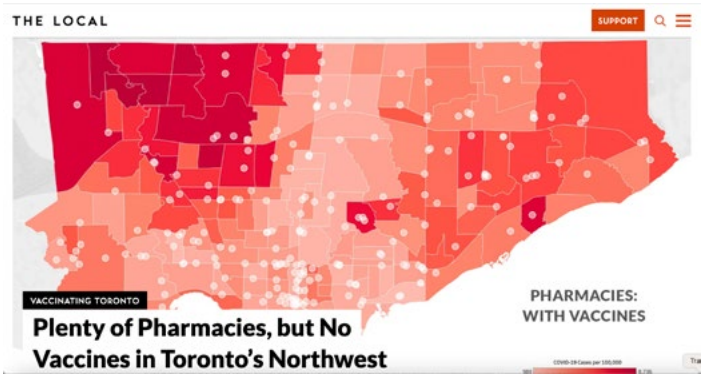
At a time when COVID-19 vaccinations were mainly delivered through mass immunization clinics, The Local's reporting clearly demonstrated the success of pilot efforts at community vaccination clinics, as vaccination rates then rose in the targeted 'hot spot' neighbourhoods. According to the official, "in Thorncliffe Park . . . we brought vaccine into the area, into a local mosque, (and) delivered high doses of vaccine to thousands of people. And it's through that Hot Spot Tracker that The Local actually showed how this neighborhood went from being one of the least vaccinated neighborhoods in Toronto, to above average . . . when you see data that compelling, it's hard not to act on it" (personal communication, February 24, 2023).

These examples from the interviews reflect a broader reality. In follow-up exchanges with The Local, Executive Editor Nicolas Hune-Brown shared multiple examples of public health officials with important responsibilities in the vaccine roll-out infrastructure, including the Sprint strategy, thanking The Local in writing and attributing specific wins, such as getting the 'green light' for vaccination clinics in underserved neighbourhoods, or for an increase in priority and resourcing to accelerate vaccination efforts in a particular 'hot spot.' In private communication with this author, other staff and Board members of The Local have also referred to conversations and communications of a similar nature with health officials.

Public health officials described The Local's coverage as making irrefutable, data-based arguments showing inequities in vaccination distribution, for example through the aforementioned Hot Spot Tracker, and through a "pharmacy desert" map[5] (**Figure 2**), and by demonstrating the successes of the Sprint strategy both through the Hot Spot Tracker and through reporting on the community vaccination clinics. They also described this coverage as being regularly seen over Twitter by key health professionals, administrators, bureaucrats and government officials, thus generating political pressure in support of equity focused allocation of vaccination doses and resources within the larger vaccination campaign. The Local's Vaccinating Toronto series, which rolled out over spring and summer 2021,[6] had a viewership of hundreds of thousands of people, four times higher than the viewership for any other Local issue in either 2020 or 2021.[7] The

Figure 2. *Maps posted by The Local comparing all pharmacies versus pharmacies with vaccines*





[5] This was the colloquial name used by interviewees for the data visualization. The visualization mapped densities of COVID-19 infections per forward sortation area, while toggling between displaying all pharmacies in the city and showing only pharmacies which were giving COVID-19 vaccinations. Disadvantaged areas with high covid rates did not lack for pharmacies, but a strikingly low percent offered covid vaccinations compared to pharmacies in wealthier neighbourhoods.

[6] During the pandemic, one of the pivots The Local made to be more responsive in the moment to changing pandemic conditions was to experiment with publishing an issue as a 'series' over a period of weeks as individual articles were completed.

[7] The exact figures are proprietary, although the author has access to them.

highest single-day spike in viewership, in the tens of thousands, corresponded with the publication of Tai Huynh's "Behind the Sudden Drop at Toronto's Mass Immunization Clinics," a data-rich and, also, in situ exploration of how, months into Toronto's vaccination campaign, much more poorly resourced, grassroots-oriented pop-up vaccination clinics in underserved neighbourhoods were substantially out-performing large, well-funded city-run vaccination clinics. Other stories on the vaccine roll-out in Peel and Toronto had similar high page views.

Local data visualizations that were multi-week- or month-long projects, regularly updated, kept attention and political pressure on real-time progress of efforts to mitigate COVID-19 spread, highlighting what was working (and thus should be supported) and what was less successful. City Councillor Joe Cressy described reflections he had when The Local's reporting showed that despite a well-resourced strategy of 300 school-based vaccination clinics in hard-hit neighbourhoods in the first two weeks of vaccinations for five- to11-year-olds, 'hot spot' neighbourhoods continued to have the lowest vaccination rates for this age group. While Toronto Public Health "built an equity-driven model from day one," campaigners had to adjust their thinking from disappointment "that the kids in Rosedale still got vaccinated at higher rates than the kids in Rexdale," to "we didn't fix structural inequality on the basis of a well-run five- to 11-year-old vaccine campaign, but we've mitigated a lot of risk" (personal communication, November 27, 2022).

The other main impact of The Local's work was that it shifted the amount and tenor of mainstream media coverage of how the COVID-19 pandemic was unfolding in communities in greater Toronto. Many journalists described how The Local's coverage of underserved communities such as Peel, and of marginalized constituencies, such as essential workers, not only impressed them but prompted them to reflect upon how their own journalism could be better. Some specifically stated that The Local's leadership influenced newsroom pandemic coverage. For example, Nora Loreto, a prominent newspaper and magazine freelancer who also wrote a book about the pandemic response in Canada, asserted that The Local "drove analysis, often *The Globe and Mail* was chasing them, or CBC was chasing them" (personal communication, September 30, 2022). Another health reporter from a major news outlet called The Local's reporting a "game changer," and described it as coming up repeatedly in team meetings about pandemic reporting, shortly before managers at her news outlet decided to dedicate substantially more resources to reporting on the pandemic in Peel and other hard-hit communities.[8] Multiple public health advocates and journalists pinpointed Fatima Syed's article "You Can't Stop the Spread of the Virus if You Don't Stop it in Peel," as a key inflection point in pandemic coverage. In the announcement jointly awarding Fatima Syed and Tai Huynh a 2022 Press Freedom Award for The Local's COVID-19 coverage, World Press Freedom Canada stated of Syed, "Her groundbreaking series of articles led the national media to focus on Peel" (World Press Freedom Canada, 2022). **Table 2** lists awards The Local won either for elements of its pandemic coverage or for its overall coverage in 2021; as these awards are given by journalism-focused organizations and are geared towards a community of journalists and the journalism industry, they can be taken as further recognition that The Local was understood by both new and legacy media to have played an influential role in pandemic coverage. The Press Freedom Award is particularly of note because it is given out for "outstanding achievements by Canadian media workers who produce public-interest journalism while overcoming secrecy, threats and intimidation, refusal to comply with freedom of information requests, or other factors that suppress information gathering" (World Press Freedom Canada, 2022). The Local was able to break silences in an atmosphere where the government was either not gathering or actively suppressing certain unfavourable information,[9] and where health workers and other essential workers were often afraid to speak out.

[8] In cases where reporters worked at outlets that could be seen as direct competitors, and they are essentially comparing their own employer's work unfavourably to The Local's, I have omitted identifying details.

[9] This claim was made by both Nora Loreto and an anonymous health journalist interviewee, referencing specific examples such as concerns about reporting on COVID-19 cases in long-term care homes.

Table 2: *Accolades for the Local for 2021 reporting*

Winner	Award type	From	For
Fatima Syed and Tai Huynh	2022 Press Freedom Award	World Press Freedom Canada	COVID-19 coverage
Aparita Bhandari	2021 Silver: Best News Coverage, Community Publication	Digital Publishing Awards	COVID-19 coverage
Tai Huynh	2021 Honorable Mention: Best News Coverage, Community Publication	Digital Publishing Awards	COVID-19 coverage
Kat Eschner	2021 Silver: Best Feature Article, Short	Digital Publishing Awards	COVID-19 coverage
Simon Lewsen	2021 Gold: Best Feature Article, Long	Digital Publishing Awards	COVID-19 coverage
The Local	2021 Gold: General Excellence in Digital Publishing, Small	Digital Publishing Awards	2021 reporting, general
Danielle Groen	2022 Short Feature Writing	National Magazine Awards	COVID-19 coverage
The Local	2022 Honorable Mention: Issue Grand Prize	National Magazine Awards	COVID-19 coverage
Nicolas Hune-Brown	2022 Editor Grand Prize	National Magazine Awards	2021 reporting, general

Thematic findings

The Local captured so much attention because of its outstanding coverage of the pandemic from a health equity standpoint. The following sections expand on key themes in the interviews which describe the specifics of what was original and impactful about The Local's reporting; the characteristics of The Local that allowed it to operate as it did; some of the multipliers that helped The Local's work spread; and some of the structural limitations to this type of journalism.

Data journalism

> (with) The Local, there has been this amazing leveraging of that data that I think has . . . exposed the hardships faced by a lot of different groups and communities, in ways that were so impactful. It was really easy to see, in black and white. It makes it hard for people to look away. Even if they have nothing in common with those groups, they are in a different income bracket, and their lives don't intersect at all. It's harder when you see in black and white, in print. Like, this is the plight these groups were facing. And I think it also just showed us how rich and valuable data is in our reporting, and how desperately we need this going forward. (personal communication, October 13, 2022)
>
> –A health reporter interviewee, referring to the use of forward sortation/postal code data in The Local's reporting[10]

Local Executive Editor Nicolas Hune-Brown described how "in our very first issue as an independent publication, we created this interactive

[10] The interviewee began by saying a few outlets had done data in the pandemic exceptionally well, then they mentioned The Local by name.

map that just tried to talk about disparities between neighborhoods like that's, that's in our DNA" (personal communication, August 25, 2022). From the outset, The Local approached data journalism through a health equity lens. This was groundbreaking. The Local pursued hyperlocal journalism in which, at a very granular level, data journalism surfaced stark population health disparities between different communities. This disrupted mainstream narratives of collective suffering during the pandemic: clearly, some communities suffered more. For example, the "pharmacy desert" map showed plainly that, rather than people from poorer, racialized neighbourhoods being unwilling to get vaccinated, they had much higher structural barriers to accessing vaccinations. In overlaying socioeconomic indicators with public health indicators at a neighbourhood level, and tracking these variables over time, The Local surfaced trends and gaps that mainstream media outlets had not been able to parse. This data was concretely useful, not just to policy makers, but to parents, workers, and to generally anyone impacted by the pandemic. The Local's most popular dynamic data visualization, the School Tracker, was consulted by tens of thousands of parents.[11]

Clear, up-to-date, and relevant data journalism was part of what built reader trust in The Local and in Editor-in-Chief Tai Huynh, who regularly tweeted Local data visualizations and on-the-scene photos from vaccination clinics. Health justice advocate Naheed Dosani described The Local's reporting as

> digging deep at the roots of access to care for communities during the pandemic, and particularly communities that were hardest hit. Giving real objective information and visualization of that information to really allow us to appreciate how inequitable things really were for certain groups and certain people . . . the rigor and detail was impressive, the utilization of data and graphics to present that data was superbly unique and innovative. And it (was) just something I didn't see in other media outlets. (personal communication, November 30, 2022)

Some of this work could be thought of as public service journalism: The Local was providing information that perhaps governments should have, but did not. For example, The Local set up a RAT tracker (for Rapid Antigen Test) because, while all Toronto students had been given RATs and instructed to test for COVID-19 positivity every 3-4 days over the 2021-22 winter break, there was no mechanism for reporting this data and making it available at the level of individual schools. The RAT tracker, however, also illustrated the limits of such work: The Local shut it down within two weeks because while the data was consistent with overall COVID-19 rates, the lower participation rates from a voluntary reporting mechanism meant that the picture at the individual school level was not granular/accurate enough to be a robust tool for parental decision making (Huynh & Hune-Brown, 2022).

Much of The Local's investigative reporting and many of its in-depth features flowed from its data work. As journalist Fatima Syed described it, the approach was "people and data," that

> The Local was seeing it and collecting it at such a granular level that it was undeniable, that Jane and Finch was going to be hurting the most right now. And if that's what was happening, instead of just writing that Jane and Finch is hurting, let's go to Jane and Finch and understand why is it hurting? What do they need? Who are the people who are hurting? And let's tell that story right. (personal communication, May 17, 2023)

This approach led to stories like "The 35 Jane," which follows essential workers and other commuters on a crowded bus line during the height of the pandemic, and to Syed's award-winning feature "You Can't Stop the Spread of the Virus if You Don't Stop it in Peel."

Community connection

Across multiple registers, The Local did an excellent job of building trusting, long-term relationships with different communities. These relationships arose from the unique structure, policies, and history of The Local.

[11] Tai Huynh described the page views as in the 100,000 range, and since the thousands of data points were reported to The Local by parents themselves (how many COVID-19 positive tests there had been that week at individual GTA schools), it is likely that most viewers were parents.

Incubation at OpenLab

The Local began as a hyperlocal storytelling project of OpenLab, an incubator within the University Health Network, a multi-site, state-of-the-art research hospital affiliated with the University of Toronto. Its first employees were not originally journalists, but scientifically trained people involved in health research and policy, who were part of the public health community and had relatively good access to health statistics and data. One of the anonymous health sector interviewees described how he considered Tai Huynh a colleague whom he texted and called, rather than a journalist. Particularly considering the earlier-described 'chill' that many public health workers felt around their ability to speak publicly about their concerns, having Local staff who were 'insiders' who also worked within the public health system, made a considerable difference.[12] City Councillor Joe Cressy, Chair of the Toronto Board of Health, and member of the City of Toronto's COVID-19 Strategic Command team and Immunization Task Force, described The Local as having "strong ties" within the public health community. Through his work with OpenLab, Huynh was involved in the behind-the-scenes of organizing community and mass vaccination clinics, which were extensive logistical endeavors. This connection gave The Local both more access to, and a deeper understanding of, how these clinics ran. It was therefore able to feature in-depth, timely, on the ground coverage of community vaccination clinics.

Solutions journalism

In turn, The Local's presence at these clinics built trust with local communities. Tai Huynh 'live-tweeted' from community mass vaccination clinics, showing volunteers and staff at work, and highlighting the number of people vaccinated on a given day. Photo essays like "Bringing the Vaccine to Where it's Needed," which featured the voices of residents getting vaccinated at a pop-up clinic in the forward sortation area/postal codes with the lowest vaccination rate in the city, a Toronto neighbourhood known as Jane and Finch, pushed back on the narrative that the community was vaccine hesitant. Rather, throngs of people were relieved and happy to be vaccinated, once structural barriers (such as not having a health card) were removed. Multiple interviewees in the public health field, some themselves members of racialized communities, mentioned how the portrayal of public health successes in 'hot spot' neighbourhoods, such as the feature "Getting Vaccinated in the Holy Month," was a breath of fresh air for communities that were often portrayed negatively. As part of The Local's practice, article subjects were always sent a final copy upon publication, to read and share as they found appropriate. This type of *solutions journalism* was not only helpful for professionals advocating within public health structures for vaccination equity: consistently showing the achievements of community leaders and community volunteers in hard-hit neighbourhoods built trust with racialized communities and grew The Local's audience. **Figure 3**, a tweet from Sophie Ikura, ounder and Executive Director of Health Commons Solutions Lab, offers an example of The Local's work reaching, and influencing, people in a hard-hit north Toronto neighbourhood.

Figure 3. *Sophia Ikura tweet*

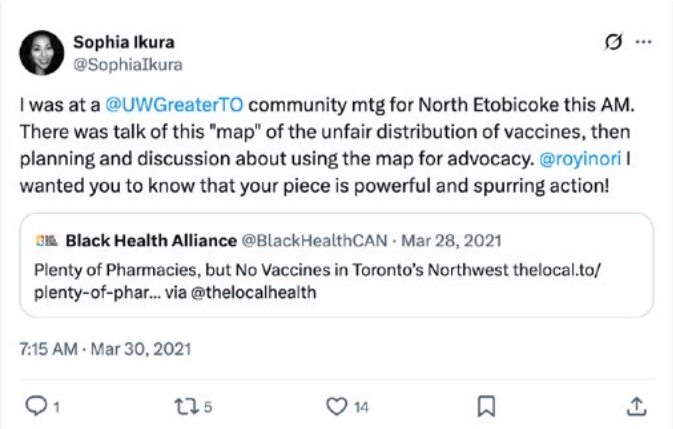
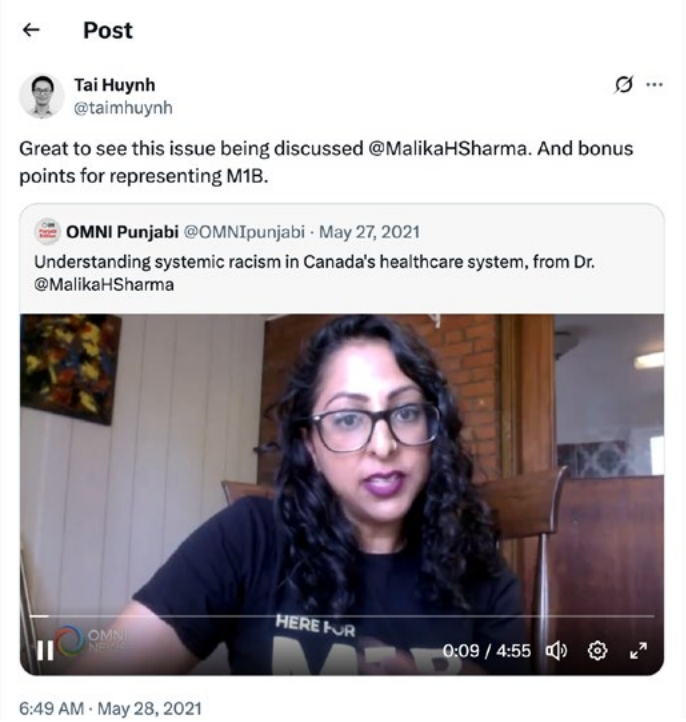


Figure 4 (following page), a retweet from Tai Huynh of a tweet from the nightly Punjabi language TV broadcast of OMNI, a multilingual television station, is another. The featured doctor, who is speaking about racism within the health care system, is wearing a "Here for M1B" t-shirt:

[12] Tai Huynh and The Local's Manager of Operations Craig Madho were both affiliated with the OpenLab prior to working at The Local, and continued to be so after The Local became independent in 2019.

Figure 4. *Tai Huynh tweet*



The Local had reported from the first pop-up clinic in M1B, or the Malvern neighbourhood, a COVID-19 hot spot. Tai Huynh had printed up and given out these shirts to staff and volunteers working at Malvern vaccination pop-ups.[13]

Structural commitments to racial equity

Nicolas Hune-Brown described that

> 73 percent of The Local's contributors self-identify as being racialized, which is unheard of in Canadian media, especially in Canadian media that isn't the ethnic press. . . . We make a commitment each year to support young journalists, emerging journalists, BIPOC, to really establish a strong footing in industry. (personal communication, August 25, 2022)

The Local has a Race, Representation and Equity Commitment, and regularly reports how it is implementing the policy and hitting its targets. The Local assigns stories and builds its roster of journalists based on a belief that reporters who have the tightest connection to a community can report on it best. During the pandemic, The Local launched a fellowship program that Executive Editor Nicolas Hune-Brown described as having interrelated goals for its first cohort: to foreground the experiences of hard-hit and little featured Toronto neighbourhoods by mentoring and training aspiring journalists who were from and therefore understood these communities. The issue prior to the Vaccinating Toronto issue, the Winter 2021 issue Pandemic Faultlines, was a culminating project for the fellowship journalists. Through the fellowship program, which has continued in subsequent years, The Local aims not only to develop a sizeable pool of racialized journalists with close connections to underserved communities in the GTA, but also to support a 'pipeline' for BIPOC journalists to build their skills and take up more prominent positions throughout Canadian media.

A commitment to following community issues long term

The Local's pandemic coverage is one example of the magazine following subject matter long term: six issues of The Local, over the course of two years, addressed how the pandemic impacted GTA communities. This coverage sustained multiple long term narrative arcs, such as looking at disparities in COVID-19 rates and vaccination in schools; following the progress of mass vaccination campaigns in hot spot neighbourhoods; and examining ongoing risks in congregate settings such as public transit.

The Local's mandate, to cover social determinants of health, means that it comes back again and again to key issues, such as homelessness or structural barriers Black Torontonians experience in accessing public services. This is reflected in the thematic structure of issues—for example, 'day in the life' issues, that take the pulse of the city at a particular time, whether in pandemic circumstance or looking at shift workers and others awake at 3 a.m. The Local builds community relationships over time through this enduring presence.

Stable yet flexible funding

OpenLab, where The Local was incubated from 2017 to 2019, is an innovation hub funded by the University Health Network. Because The Local didn't need to be immediately self-supporting, it was able to experiment with formats and

[13] The Local gives donors a similarly designed t-shirt, displaying "Here for YYZ," the code for Toronto's Pearson International Airport.

approaches, focusing on quality journalism and on building the organization and its relationships. In September of 2018, The Local met with several important Toronto area foundation funders, with a series of Local stories from various Toronto neighbourhoods as proof of concept. Multiple foundations agreed to pool their resources and provide The Local with three years of start-up funding as "trust-based philanthropy" (Huynh, 2024). This allowed The Local to be nimble in the unprecedented pandemic situation, pivoting from quarterly publication to a more responsive model, with articles appearing on a rolling basis, even as groups of articles would form one 'Issue.' Being able to focus on producing the most appropriate journalism in turn helped The Local build a greater supporter base. Since gaining charitable tax status in 2022 as a Registered Journalism Organization, The Local has aimed to diversify its funding base to include more small individual donor supporters.

Multiplier effects

The Local offered quality information not accessible elsewhere, and built strong relationships of trust within key communities. However, for The Local to extend its reach and influence, several contextual factors were at play, as described below.

Amplification through social media and through other journalism outlets

As per Chen and Roburn (2025), The Local substantively grew its following through Twitter, as posts by The Local and its journalists were repeatedly shared, bringing The Local's journalism to the attention of new audiences. Facebook helped in connecting with parents who were a key audience for the School Tracker.

Racialized journalists, including Syed, emphasized that for racialized journalists who faced structural barriers to participation in mainstream media, Twitter and other social media were important channels for accessing audiences and building their profiles, and for marginalized people to tell their stories and shape broader narratives. Local freelancer Syed's personal following over Twitter was another route for Local features to reach new audiences. More generally, journalists and journalism outlets played a significant role in The Local's Peel coverage gaining wide traction. They both shared Local stories over social media, and had Local reporters as interviewees in their TV and radio stories, reaching mainstream audiences. For example, Syed spoke multiple times on the CBC, Canada's public broadcaster, about the crisis in Peel, including as a featured guest on the daily early morning CBC radio national affairs talk show, *The Current*.

As the pandemic wore on, and some doctors built a social media following as "self-styled experts" who were perceived to have their own agendas, trust declined in 'pandemic Twitter.'[14] Yet The Local kept its influence. The tweets of Editor-in-Chief Tai Huynh, in particular, were generally perceived to be fact-based and credible, rather than agenda or personality driven.

Collaboration with The Toronto Star

The excellence of The Local's data journalism led to collaborative reporting published in *The Toronto Star*, the main Toronto-based newspaper. The first of two major data-based collaborations appeared in early June 2021, a few days after the six-month period that was the focus of the social media component of this study. However, multiple interviewees mentioned the collaboration[15] as widening the reach of The Local's journalism. In the words of The Star's Kenyon Wallace:

> we had seen Tai do a really cool graphic looking at vaccination in hot spots versus non-hot spots over time, it was like a moving graphic, it's actually a flourish chart. And we had not done such a thing. . . . We knew him well enough to approach him to ask if he would be willing to team up with us to share that with us, partly because it's a very, very useful, interesting way to show

[14] This was discussed at length by a health reporter who wished to remain anonymous, in relation to the challenges of finding medical professionals who were accessible and willing to speak on the record, without returning to the same voices all the time. Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) also describe the phenomenon of certain medical professionals becoming household names in Ontario due to their establishing themselves as COVID-19 'experts' through media and social media.

[15] Kenyon Wallace highlighted two major collaborations: the Hot Spot collaboration described in the quote and a separate collaboration that assigned COVID-19 risk scores at the individual school level for every city elementary and middle school.

> the data. And we felt that it was important that as many readers as possible get to see that. . . . [It] would be beneficial to the public. . . . So we did this big feature on looking at vaccination rates in the areas that were deemed hot spots by the province in terms of those priority neighborhoods that were targeted for vaccination, and also areas that had had disproportionate rates of infection. And so luckily, for us, he agreed, and we were able to publish that piece, which I think worked out really well. (personal communication, August 25, 2022)

This passage shows clearly that The Local was seen as a data journalism innovator. It also highlights a more collaborative rather than competitive approach to news gathering, and underlines a service journalism orientation that emerged in much pandemic reporting.

No paywall

The Local's site is free and accessible to anyone with an internet connection. This made its journalism more accessible for the marginalized communities featured in its journalism.

Quantitative analysis

Journalists interviewed, both from The Local and elsewhere, made multiple statements that The Local influenced the coverage of the roll-out of vaccinations in the GTA towards a greater focus on vaccination equity and on Peel and other underserved regions. Social media analysis, as per the first phase of this study (Chen & Roburn, 2025), has evolved methods for quantitative analysis of certain types of influence, for example by looking at number of times a message is shared and analyzing the links/networks by which information circulates. However there is not the same kind of developed analytical method for empirically establishing how one news publication's coverage might influence another's. Without the more direct demonstration of information 'flows' available with social media analytics, one cannot have certainty, even if there is correlation between two publications, that one 'caused' influence on the other. However, arising from the interview findings was a clear inflection point for the interviewees claims of a change in coverage: the publication of "You Can't Stop the Spread of the Virus if You Don't Stop it in Peel" on April 22, 2021, one of three Peel-based investigative stories for The Local for which Fatima Syed won the 2022 Press Freedom Award from World Press Freedom Canada (WPFC). It is possible to investigate if Peel region received more coverage after the publication of the article, and if the coverage shifted towards more of a health justice frame.

To investigate this claim empirically, all articles mentioning COVID-19 and Peel and/or Brampton and/or L6P (the forward sortation area for Brampton in Peel region) published in two major papers, *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, were compared for two time periods: six weeks before Syed's article was published and six weeks after. Articles where the pandemic was mentioned incidentally were discarded. The relevant articles were analyzed in two ways.

Firstly, articles were categorized by overall number and length, to see if the amount of coverage increased. As COVID-19 mentions declined in both papers in the second time period compared to the first, for the purpose of this analysis, the two periods were compared in terms of the relative frequency of discussion of the Peel region and of specific frames such as health justice within overall pandemic reporting.

As seen in **Table 3**, *The Star* increased its relative coverage of the pandemic in Peel after April 22.[16] In the six weeks after Syed's article, the number of articles with relevant mentions of the Peel region's pandemic experience stayed relatively the same (28 articles before, 30 after), despite a decline in overall pandemic coverage. More dramatically, articles with a clear focus on the Peel region jumped from 16 to 25. Overall, articles discussing the Peel region increased in the second period, from 1.2 % of articles mentioning COVID-19 to 2% of the total. When length of articles, used as a proxy for depth of coverage, is taken into account, the increase between time periods is less pronounced. While articles with significant mentions of Peel increased

[16] One *Star* journalist was careful to note that the paper, independent of The Local's interventions, had a long-standing commitment to health reporting and to adopting an equity perspective. As an example, on April 22, the day Syed's article ran, an article in *The Star* celebrated reporter Sara Mojtehedzadeh's win of an Amnesty International Media Award for her work on rights and working conditions in Amazon warehouses in Canada. Before April 22, *The Star* did significant work reporting on a COVID-19 outbreak at an Amazon warehouse in Peel, where over 600 workers fell ill.

Table 3. *Coverage of Peel/Brampton/LP6*

Article source and category	Length of articles	Six weeks prior to April 22	Following six weeks
Globe and Mail			
Mentions			
	short	5	
	medium	11	7
	long	2	2
Clear focus			
	short	3	
	medium	4	7
	long	2	3
Toronto Star			
Mentions			
	short	12	9
	medium	15	14
	long	1	7
Clear focus			
	short	3	11
	medium	8	10
	long	6	5

in overall length, the increase in focused articles on Peel skewed towards shorter articles; numbers of medium and longer articles stayed largely the same, but there was a significant increase in short articles.

Shifts towards greater coverage of Peel region in *The Globe and Mail* were more equivocal, which is to be expected as *The Globe* is a national paper rather than one focused on the GTA. In the post-April 22 period, the number of articles with a clear focus on Peel region rose very slightly in *The Globe and Mail* (from nine to 10), despite a roughly 14% overall decline in pandemic coverage. However overall, Peel coverage declined from 2.6% of overall coverage mentioning COVID-19 to 2%, with the number of articles with relevant mentions (at least two to four sentences analyzing specific issues in the Peel region) halved. While there were fewer articles discussing Peel region in the second period, they skewed overall longer. No articles in the second period were classified as short (either mentions or focused category) increasing the overall average length of articles as long articles were the same in the two periods.

The second part of the quantitative analysis sought to discover if after April 22 more articles followed The Local's lead in telling first-person stories—for example, of a thirteen year old child of an essential worker who passed away from COVID-19 in Brampton—and in taking up a health justice frame. Articles were classified as taking up a health justice frame if they echoed perspectives taken in various Local articles about pandemic issues such as an emphasis on high rates of COVID-19 among essential workers who lacked sick pay, or concerns about equity in access to

vaccinations. Overall, after April 22, both papers increasingly used health equity frames and told the stories of individuals living in the Peel region as part of their reporting. *The Globe and Mail* shift is slight: the main difference between the two periods is that *The Globe* began to use the frame of 'hot spots,' meaning structurally disadvantaged areas/neighbourhoods where the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were more severe. *The Toronto Star* had a more significant 57% increase in articles that used a health equity frame. *The Star* also had a 50% increase in reporting that drew on personal narratives of ordinary people living in Peel region, with two-thirds of these articles having a health equity framing. Given the relatively small number of articles in the sample, it is difficult to be definitive about these effects. However, overall, the results are consistent with and support the multiple testimonies given by journalists and health advocates in this study that Syed's article helped catalyze more in-depth coverage of the pandemic in Peel region from mainstream media locally, and a shift towards health justice and personal storytelling frames within the reporting.

DISCUSSION

Although it is a relatively small digital news startup of modest resources, the results of this study suggest that The Local had a significant impact on COVID-19 vaccination and health policy in the GTA in the January to June 2021 period. This directly impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people in underserved GTA communities, who were able to access vaccinations and reduce their exposure to serious illness.

In this instance, The Local was successful in carrying out its mandate of covering urban health and social issues by filling "a role that traditional media neglects—turning complex policy issues into compelling narratives, and addressing problems that are systemic and ongoing, even if they don't have a news hook" (The Local, 2025).

The "method" by which The Local achieved these results is complex. Many findings–such as a focus on collaborative and solutions-based journalism–resonate with other research into digital journalism start-ups. At the same time, it can be argued that The Local has evolved a unique approach. Reporting has a clear perspective (or agenda) of a health justice lens, but at the same time is data-driven. Data itself, presented succinctly and clearly, starkly surfaces unequal health outcomes, prompting important policy questions regarding how such unequal outcomes could occur. The Local then provides context for the issue (in this case, pandemic health outcomes) through deep feature reporting by and with communities. Such reporting showcases community-based solutions where possible, and often brings in experts to provide background and explain policy options.

This approach upends assumptions of traditional models of journalistic objectivity, which equate taking a perspective with bias and with distorting, rather than serving, accuracy and truth. The Local is by no means unique in this. Such changes to journalistic ethics and approaches are seen in many new journalism start-ups (Callison & Young, 2020), and in forms of reporting that have evolved to address climate change (Dunwoody, 2015). In the case of The Local, truthful, contextually appropriate and fact-based reporting arises through an ethics of accountability, transparency and representation. These ethics are not just in the reporting, but built into The Local's structure and practices. Along with the previously discussed Race, Representation and Equity Commitment, The Local has a Code of Ethics, publicly available on The Local's website, that makes specific commitments to accuracy, editorial independence, and transparency—for example, The Local publishes a list on its website of the sources of all donations over $5,000.

More research is needed to see if this "method" applies to how The Local reports on other 'systemic and ongoing' population health emergencies, and if it is effective. Unlike a pandemic, which evolves relatively rapidly and has impacts that cut across society, concerns such as the opioid crisis and urban heat/climate change impacts are examples of 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011), and are notoriously hard to draw attention to in a news milieu focused on the urgent and spectacular. There is anecdotal evidence that new types of journalism ventures are finding ways to successfully foreground such slow violence issues. For example, The Baltimore Banner, a digital community news start-up based in Baltimore, won a 2025 Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the fentanyl crisis. This journalism resembled The Local in

that it had a collaborative element (with *The New York Times* fellowship program); involved data journalism that accessed and made legible and public a set of records that the government was reluctant to turn over; and focused on the health equity dimensions of the crisis, which disproportionately affected older Black men (Boteler, 2025). *Crackdown*, a podcast about the toxic drug crisis produced by and for drug users, offers another example. The podcast not only shot to the top of the Canadian iTunes podcast charts, but has won numerous awards, and been featured in mainstream media and even in The Columbia Journalism Review (Mullins, 2025).

To the degree that The Local is a successful example of a small journalism start-up growing in the gaps left by the dramatic decline of community journalism in Canada in recent years, one must ask if this success is replicable, if it is scalable, and what its limits are.

Answers to some of these questions are as yet unclear, and depend on policy choices and journalistic innovation. For example, while only certain journalism start-ups are likely to be able to attract substantive 'start-up' funding as The Local did, changes to government funding models can help most journalism start-ups. In Canada, a coalition of such start-ups were a part of conversations with the federal government on eligibility for journalism support funds and tax credits. Registered Journalism Organization status, which first came into effect in 2020, allows a news organization to offer charitable tax receipts for donations it receives. The diversification of revenue sources for journalism start-ups is a larger discussion, but The Local's staged approach—wherein it could focus on building its community relationships and its journalism, and seek to diversify to subscriptions and other revenue sources once more established[17]—is instructive.

This study underlines the increasing relevance of data journalism, even for small journalism start-ups. The loss of community journalism outlets contributes to local issues being under or unreported, and data can surface such issues – this 'scales up' beyond The Local's experiences in Toronto. Luckily journalism education is shifting accordingly, and innovative partnerships such as the Local News Data Hub—wherein journalism students identify and process newsworthy data sets, and use a semi-automated process to create stories populated with data targeted to specific communities, available through a wire service—are lowering the costs and structural barriers to accessing data journalism. However, this type of hyperlocal data journalism depends on relevant data being publicly available. This can be a significant constraint, especially where governments do not wish to disclose information.

Although this study suggests that social media can play an important role in disseminating and popularizing stories from community journalism start-ups, it is difficult to apply this finding when the Canadian social media landscape has changed since the study period; Meta (and thus Facebook, Instagram, and Threads) no longer allows links to Canadian news stories, and the parameters and audience of Twitter, now rebranded as "X," has altered substantively.[18] However, the results do point to the importance of further research and policy innovations with regards to one paradox of social media: the dilemmas posed to racialized and female-identified journalists. Racialized and women journalists in this study stressed that social media was an important pathway to accessing audiences; at the same time, such journalists experienced significant levels of harassment, disproportionately to white and male peers. Online harassment is not only a stressor that requires emotional labour, but produces a significant time penalty for journalists who must report threats to police and engage in other procedures such as responding to inappropriate complaints.

Larger media organizations may have an ombudsperson to deal with complaints from the public, so journalists have limited interface with an irate audience. They may also have more resources to devote to information technology supports which can also minimize journalist exposure to harassment. While small start-ups can support some individual-focused measures to counter harassment, such as better training

[17] The Local has launched The Local StoryLab, a paid service whereby Local journalists produce stories for mission-driven organizations to host on their websites. The earnings go to supporting The Local.

[18] As an example of the impact of these changes, in 2019 40% of The Local's traffic came through Facebook links. By the end of 2023, that percentage was zero. See https://thelocal.to/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/The-Local_Impact-Report-2023-1.pdf

for freelancers in securing one's online profiles and managing social media accounts to minimize exposure, they are less able to insulate racialized and women identified journalists from hate. A more global solution for such online hate and harassment is effective platform regulation. This is a broader social issue, but it should be noted that better platform regulation is actually crucial to the flourishing of a more equitable news ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study resonate with much current research characterizing how not-for-profit digital news startups are evolving within the broader journalism landscape. In focusing on The Local, an online magazine which explicitly takes an intersectional focus not only in its content but in its own workings, the research furthers understandings of how intersectional approaches can play out in digital news start-ups. It contributes to several ongoing research conversations about journalism startups. These include discussions of the ways hyperlocal digital journalism disrupts the geographies of power that play out in traditional news media (Downman & Murray, 2018); explorations of the "service journalism" turn of startups (Appelgren & Linden, 2020) and digital/data journalism (Widholm & Appelgren, 2020), which is especially germane in the context of underserved communities where relevant civic information is the least available; and observations of how dynamics of gender, colonialism and technology intersect in how a social purpose digital news startup pursues journalistic innovations to meet the needs of traditionally neglected audiences (Young & Callison 2017).

Further, this case study concretizes the real-world impact of a particular digital journalism start-up's news coverage in one 'hyperlocal' area. While marginalized communities frequently object to mainstream media coverage that stereotypes and stigmatizes, blaming communities for social problems while obscuring the relations of power that create structural disadvantage (Zappia & Cheshire 2014), little research specifically demonstrates that more apposite journalism has made a material difference in social policy and in the day-to-day lives of community members. This case study, in providing tangible evidence of significant positive impacts, in this instance on health policy and health equity metrics, supplements the largely anecdotal illustrations of impact that not-for-profit journalism start-ups furnish to insist upon their worth to funders.

As traditional infrastructures of community news sharing continue to decline, this research offers a kernel of hope that hyperlocal digital community journalism can not only help alleviate 'news deserts,' but can offer a type of journalism that is more relevant and more equitable.

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Voices of the Khwaja sira: Navigating trans rights, religion, and journalism in Pakistan

Les voix du Khwaja sira : Naviguer entre droits des trans, religion et journalisme au Pakistan

Yumna Iftikhar

ABSTRACT

This multimedia journalism feature article raises the complicated question of compensating sources and funding events for journalistic projects, which is generally frowned upon among Western news organizations. However, some journalists have argued that exceptions should be made when important voices cannot contribute to a journalistic piece because of financial constraints. The author's overarching journalistic goal was to add to the limited literature on trans experiences in Pakistan and highlight the evolution of the transgender community in the South Asia, specifically the Khwaja sira community. Khwaja sira is the term used by trans women, intersex people, eunuchs and anyone who associates with a transfeminine identity. The article describes how funding a restaurant meal and transportation expenses helped gather together and build trust with a very closed-off and tight-knit community in a comfortable shared space. Through this event, the author gained insight into trans people's thoughts on a 2023 Shariat Court ruling that declared sections of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 were against Pakistan's Islamic values. Finally, the article looks at how countries worldwide are considering drawing back on trans rights.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article de fond sur le journalisme multimédia soulève la question complexe de la rémunération des sources et du financement d'événements pour des projets journalistiques, ce qui est généralement désapprouvé par les organismes de presse occidentaux. Toutefois, certain.e.s journalistes affirment qu'il faut faire des exceptions lorsque des voix importantes ne peuvent pas contribuer à un projet journalistique en raison de contraintes financières. L'objectif journalistique primordial de la rédactrice était de compléter la littérature limitée sur les expériences transgenres au Pakistan et de mettre en lumière l'évolution de la communauté transgenre dans Asie du Sud, en particulier la communauté khwaja sira. Khwaja sira est le terme utilisé par les femmes trans, les personnes intersexuées, les eunuques et toute personne associée à une identité transféminine. L'article décrit comment le financement d'un repas au restaurant et des frais de transport a permis de rassembler et d'instaurer la confiance au sein d'une communauté très fermée et très soudée, dans un espace partagé confortable. Grâce à cet événement, l'auteure a pu se faire une idée de ce que pensent les personnes transgenres d'une décision de la Cour de la Shariat de 2023 qui a déclaré que les articles de la loi de 2018 sur les personnes transgenres (protection des droits) allaient à l'encontre des valeurs islamiques du Pakistan. Enfin, l'article examine comment les pays du monde entier envisagent de revenir sur les droits des personnes transgenres.

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: engaged journalism, interviewing, chequebook journalism, journalism ethics, journalism interviews, trans rights, Khwaja sira, vulnerable sources, Pakistan

Mots-clés : journalisme engagé, interviews, journalisme de chéquier, éthique journalistique, interviews journalistiques, droits des personnes transgenres, Khwaja sira, sources vulnérables, Pakistan

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BACKGROUND TO THE WORK

This article is part of a graduate research project for Carleton University's Master of Journalism program. The larger multimedia project, titled "Trans community fights to protect rights in Pakistan," aims to inform readers in Pakistan, Canada, and other parts of the world about the changes to the country's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018. In May 2023, the Shariat Court ruled that sections of the Transgender Persons Act were against the country's Islamic values. The Shariat Court is a special religious court responsible for ensuring all laws adhere to Islamic teachings.

This article aims to add to the limited literature on trans experiences in Pakistan and to highlight the evolution of the transgender community in the South Indian subcontinent, specifically the Khwaja sira community. Khwaja sira is the term used by trans women, intersex people, eunuchs and anyone who associates with a transfeminine identity.

It also discusses the complicated question of paying sources and funding events for journalistic projects, which is generally frowned upon among Western news organizations. However, some journalists have argued that exceptions should be made when important voices cannot contribute to a journalistic piece because of financial constraints.

By combining video, print, and audio, the article strives to provide Pakistan's trans people with a variety of formats in which they can share their experiences. Some sources felt uncomfortable in front of a camera and preferred to have their quotes in writing.

Trish Audette-Longo, assistant professor of digital journalism and reporting at the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, supervised this project. Pre-production work included finding a facilitator from the trans community to ensure sources felt comfortable when speaking to a foreign interviewer. Most interviews were conducted in Siraki, a regional language, and Urdu, Pakistan's national language. Primary source interviews took place in Multan, Pakistan, over four days. Multan was chosen because it is one of the oldest cities in the Indian subcontinent, dating back to the early 6th Century BC. As the fifth largest city in Pakistan, it is home to a strong transgender community.

While most journalists focus on the trans community from major cities like Karachi and Islamabad, the project focused on trans people whose voices were often left out because of their geography and lack of English skills. The author also spoke to experts and activists at length about the historical, cultural and religious impacts of trans protection laws.

Yumna Iftikhar

Editor's note

This multimedia journalism work benefited from the same double-blind peer review process as the scholarly articles and research notes we publish, a unique feature of *Facts & Frictions*. The article is presented according to Canadian Press Style Guide (as opposed to APA style) and was conducted in adherence to CP's ethical standards requirements laid out in the Guide, which serves as a core text for Canadian post-secondary journalism programs, and the Ethics Guidelines of the Canadian Association of Journalists, our discipline's professional association. At the same time, the article examines and troubles these standards, helping grow our discipline's theoretical foundations through thoughtful debate informed by practice (praxis).

Facts & Frictions invites works of journalism to undergo peer review because we acknowledge that substantive research by faculty and graduate students is often presented in the form of journalism projects, a powerful platform for conveying public-interest research to a mass audience. Our position is that journalism conducted in post-secondary settings is a scholarly pursuit equivalent to more traditional forms of research dissemination, and that such works are both deserving of, and greatly strengthened by, peer review. Our collective goal is to ensure journalistic projects—often years in the making and considered thesis-equivalent by journalism graduate programs—are afforded due recognition and respect within our pages and, by extension, within the academy. We also offer single-blind review for previously published/broadcasted works, or works where they author's identity is central to and cannot be separated from the work. For more information about our requirements for peer-reviewed journalism, please contact the editor-in-chief.

Patricia W. Elliott

Trans community fights to protect rights in Pakistan

by Yumna Iftikhar

Note: all interviews were translated from Urdu and Siraki

On a hot, humid Sunday afternoon, boisterous laughter and lively chatter fill Oregano Pizza, a restaurant in Multan, Pakistan.

It's Aug. 13, 2023, the day before Pakistan will celebrate 76 years of independence from the British Raj (British rule), and my second-to-last day in Multan. I arrived on Aug. 9 and spent four days meeting members of Pakistan's trans community and learning about their lives, experiences and reactions to the Federal Shariat Court's decision to nullify parts of a groundbreaking law to protect trans rights.

Earlier, Shani, a counsellor in Multan, Pakistan, had told me she instantly felt more empowered and confident when she heard that Pakistan's National Assembly had passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in May 2018.

"I wouldn't let male police officers touch me," she said. "I would confidently tell them that according to the bill, they couldn't touch me; only female officers could."

She memorized the act and recited her rights whenever she felt threatened. This was in contrast to when she would bite her tongue if things became too intense.

Shani and Muhammad Izhar.
Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

Like many trans people in Pakistan, Shani only uses her first name in public. Some have been abandoned by their families. Others have family members who feel uncomfortable with their identities.

To please family members or to safeguard parents from public scrutiny for having a trans child, many trans people dress according to their gender assigned at birth when at home and avoid linking their family name to their trans identity when they are out in the world.

Shani sometimes uses her partner Dr. Muhammad Izhar's last name and introduces herself as Shani Izhar. Legally, she cannot use Izhar's name because trans people cannot marry in Pakistan, but she said she is luckier than most to have a partner who is willing to share his name.

Shani is a co-founder of Satrangi, an organization that works on trans education and health in Multan. Throughout her life, she had countless encounters with the police who didn't respect her as a trans woman and with people who name-called and harassed her on the streets.

By enacting the Transgender Persons Act, Pakistan's government vocalized its support for the trans community, and Shani was excited.

After all, she wasn't alone anymore. There was a document—physical and digital proof that Pakistan considered her to be just as much of a Pakistani citizen as a cisgender person, deserving of the same rights and freedoms. She had proof that her government was on her side.

Divided into seven chapters, the act affirmed the right of persons to self-identify and to have their gender identity reflected in government documents. It also prohibited discrimination against and harassment of transgender people; gave the state responsibility to build safe houses and separate prisons for trans people; recognized trans people's rights to inheritance, education, employment, and property; and criminalized the use of transgender people for begging.

In a 2020 report, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) called trans people's right to self-identify on all legal documents the Pakistan Act's biggest strength because "it offers legal recognition of preferred gender identity as a matter of right without any medical or diagnostic requirements."

However, the report criticized various aspects of the act, including the wording about the criminalization of begging. The ICJ argues that the criminalization of begging is not just limited to "compelling" transgender people to beg but also "employing" or "using," which they argue "may, therefore, also apply to voluntary and willful actions on the part of transgender people."

The ICJ has also criticized other elements of the act, including the inclusion of intersex people in the category of transgender people, arguing that it is inaccurate and fails to fully recognize the specific legal protections required for intersex people.

The act defines transgender as "Intersex (Khunsa)," "Eunuch" or a "Transgender Man, Transgender Woman, Khawaja sira or any person," terms that are tied to Pakistan's unique culture and history.

COLONIZATION AND ERASURE OF A GENDER IDENTITY

To understand the legislation, Western critics must understand that South Asian non-binary communities have their own histories and evolutions, says Aisha Mughal, who advocated for the act.

Mughal spoke with me virtually from England, where she is now a doctoral scholar in the School for Business and Society at the University of York.

Khwaja sira "are the people who associate themselves with femininity but don't identify themselves as a woman," explained Mughal. The term is used by trans women, some intersex people, eunuchs and anyone who associates with a transfeminine identity.

Mughal added that, while it might not be a bad idea to define intersex and transgender as different identifications, it is important to acknowledge the law is for Pakistan, and that everyone who worked on it tried to acknowledge the Khwaja sira people.

The Khwaja siras have a 3,000-year history that can be traced back to the Mughal Empire. Founded by Babur, the Islamic dynasty covered the Indian subcontinent from the early 16th Century until it was replaced by British rule in the mid-19th Century.

Aisha Mughal in Brussels.
Photo supplied by A. Mughal.

AUDIO FILE >
Aisha Mughal defines Khwaja sira and their distinct cultural and historical evolution.

During Mughal rule, many Khwaja siras enjoyed esteemed positions. They were advisors, military commanders and members of the royal court.

But when Britain assumed power in 1858, Khwaja siras were stripped of their importance, and the introduction of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 criminalized their way of life.

At the time, Britain only recognized two genders—male and female—and anyone straying from them was arrested.

It would take 147 years for Kwaja sira to regain recognition, and now that recognition is already under threat.

SUPPORTIVE JOURNALISM FOR EXCLUDED VOICES

With temperatures over 35 C outside, the restaurant's loud air conditioners spits cool air, a saving grace for those escaping the scorching sun.

Saro Imran, a transgender activist and my facilitator during my trip to Multan, suggested organizing a meeting with several members of the transgender community to discuss reactions to the Shariat Court decision.

Imran proposed coordinating a dialogue at the restaurant so that people could come together and discuss what mattered to them and how they would be impacted by the Shariat Court decision. She said this would only be possible with financial assistance and suggested that $50 would cover transportation and food costs.

Imran said she would use the money to help arrange a location accessible to everyone and, if needed, transportation to and from the venue. The money would not be directly distributed to the attendees.

Most Canadian news outlets and associations do not allow or condone such offers of financial support, on the theory it can compromise the objectivity and credibility of an interviewer and a source. For example, the Canadian Association of Journalists notes in its ethical guidelines, "We do not pay for information, although we may reimburse those who provide photos, videos, or expertise in some circumstances."

Similarly, in its "Journalistic Standards and Practices" interview section, the CBC states, "We do not pay people for interviews used in our reporting. Nor do we pay people for eyewitness accounts or answering our questions about events in which they participated."

However, there are instances when journalists and media outlets have dipped into what some call "chequebook journalism" by paying sources for their time and effort. Nora Neus, an Emmy-winning U.S. journalist who paid interviewees

Interview participants gathered at Oregano Pizza. Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

to participate in her book, *24 Hours in Charlotteville*, argues, "When working with marginalized people and essentially profiting off their trauma, there are also ethical issues with not compensating them."

That is not to say that every marginalized source should be paid. Still, reasonable compensation can allow journalists to talk to sources who may otherwise be unable to take the time to meet for an interview, or cannot afford the travel, or don't have a computer or a good cell phone plan.

Outside a busy Tahafuz (Protection) Centre in Multan. Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

Since I would only be in Multan for a few days, I wouldn't have had time to meet with so many trans people separately. Building trust also takes time. I was asking members of a vulnerable population to trust me with their trauma, and if they were in one room together, they might feel more comfortable.

Excluding voices because we, as journalists, do not compensate can result in important voices being omitted from conversations about issues that directly affect them. If I hadn't provided financial support for people to gather, this article wouldn't have included the voices of young transgender people, among others.

Building trust as an outsider

Most people I interviewed in Multan spoke Siraki, an Indo-Aryan language. My father was born in a small village near Multan called Shahpur, and his parents spoke Siraki. But because my mother was from Hyderabad—a city in the province of Sindh—we grew up speaking Urdu, Pakistan's national language.

This was my first trip to Multan since I was nine, and was my re-introduction to the Siraki language. While I understood basic Siraki, and my interviewers understood Urdu, I often stumbled over English-to-Urdu translations.

On my first day, I interviewed Mahi, a victim support officer at a Tahafuz (Protection) centre in Multan. Tahafuz centres are separate departments in detached buildings near police stations, where officers respond to cases and offer social support and legal advice to members of the transgender community and other vulnerable populations.

While interviewing Mahi, Hamza Zia—a young student from Washington and Lee University who was in Pakistan conducting an entrepreneurial workshop for transgender people—handed me his phone. He was Imran's friend and had joined us for the day.

"Try speaking more Urdu; I don't think Mahi understands your questions," was the short message he typed on his note app.

I was so used to conducting interviews in English that I had unconsciously switched from Urdu to English, and Mahi hadn't corrected me. When I listened to the conversation recording after, I realized her answers didn't match my questions.

VIDEO >
Mani talks about building trust between trans people and the police.

Over the next few days, I got used to speaking more Urdu but stumbled over words and would often look to Imran to translate. My lack of fluency and my interviewees' hesitancy with a foreign journalist affected our conversations.

ONLINE RESOURCE >
Urdu trans vocabulary

YEARS OF SWEAT, STRUGGLE AND SACFIFICE

When I conducted individual interviews, it was usually Imran, the three videographers I had hired, and myself with the interviewee. We aimed a bright light and camera at them as I asked questions.

In contrast, the discussion at Oregano Pizza allowed my interviewees to have group support as they shared their experiences.

The stories they told were built upon years of sweat, struggle and sacrifice. The transgender community in Pakistan faces discrimination in all aspects of life: at home, in schools, in hospitals, and at work. Trans people often forgo inheritance after being abandoned by their families. In 2016, a trans activist was shot multiple times and then denied treatment because the hospital couldn't decide whether to move her to the men's or women's ward. In 2017, Babar Awan, then a member of the People's Party of Pakistan—a centre-left, social-democratic political party—presented the Transgender Persons Act in parliament. Awan did not respond to interview requests.

Five senators from three different political parties tabled the bill. These parties were the centre-left-leaning Pakistan People Party, the centre-right-leaning Pakistan Muslim League, and the centrist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.

A year later, the National Assembly of Pakistan passed the bill. However, it was rejected by religious parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami.

In 2021, Senator Mushtaq Ahmed of the Jamaat-e-Islami tabled amendments to the act, including requiring a medical board to determine a person's gender. Ahmed's proposed changes are still pending discussion by the Standing Committee on Human Rights and Senate.

In September 2022, Ahmed filed a complaint against the bill in the federal Shariat Court, a specialized court that determines whether a law complies with Islamic teachings. Pakistan is officially known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and Islam is the state religion.

In May 2023, the court struck down Sections 2, 3 and 7 of the Transgender Persons Act, citing them as "un-Islamic." The overturned sections protect trans people's rights to inheritance and ensure their government documents reflect their self-identified gender.

Mani (in black) and some of the officers she works with. Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

The federal government has said it will challenge the Shariat Court's decision. Representatives of the Shariat Court did not respond to interview requests.

After the Shariat Court's verdict, Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) suspended the use of the "X" category on the Computerized National Identification Cards, citing the ruling. From the end of May until September 2023, members of Pakistan's trans community could not apply for new identification cards, which are similar to Canadian social insurance numbers, unless they ticked either the male or female category that aligned with their medical records.

ONLINE RESOURCE >
Timeline of events

The move had serious repercussions. During the four months that NADRA suspended the use of the "X" category for new card applicants, trans people who did not have cards or had expired ones could not apply for passports, purchase homes, or access relief during natural disasters or other emergencies

NADRA did not respond to interview requests about its decision to halt "X" cards.

Gaining rights only to have them torn away has been a difficult test for Pakistan's trans community, according to Mahi, the victim support officer I interviewed before the pizza gathering.

"It's like allowing us to see the shoreline, so we feel hopeful about reaching it, but then taking it away," Mahi said. "So, once again, we find ourselves in the middle of the sea without a shore in sight."

FROM PAKISTAN TO CANADA, THE PUSHBACK IS GLOBAL

When the Transgender Persons Act was passed, trans activists hoped Pakistan would continue to foster equal rights and opportunities for their community.

However, rights activists like Alisha Shirazi say efforts to implement the bill were minimal and the lack of support only made space for opposing opinions.

"The government made the bill but didn't implement it properly and when finally we were seeing some change, people were speaking up and work was being done, opposition against our rights became louder," Sherazi explained.

Pakistan is not the only country to consider drawing back protection for trans people. Between 2018 and 2025, legislators in the United States have introduced 774 anti-trans laws.

In 2023, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association dropped the United Kingdom to 17th place out

Alisha Shirazi.
Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

of 49 European countries in its annual LGBTQ+ rights ranking, based on each country's laws and policies.

The United Kingdom was at the top of the list in 2005. In the past four years, a rise in anti-trans statements from politicians and an increase in hate crimes have contributed to its falling behind.

Over the years, several protests have taken place across Canada against school policies that affirm gender diversity, fueled by chants to ban LGBTQ+ books and sexual orientation and gender identity discussions in classrooms.

In Saskatchewan and Alberta, children must get their parent's consent before teachers can refer to them by their preferred pronouns and names, policies that some say violate Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

According to the Trans Murder Monitor, 4,690 trans people were killed around the world between 2008 and September 2023.

Advocacy network Transgender Europe, which leads the data collection project, said the actual number of people killed is likely much higher, but most murders are not reported, making this number "a small glimpse."

Countries with the highest number of trans murders include Brazil, Mexico and the United States. But, Transgender Europe notes, countries with higher numbers of reported murders—like Brazil—also have better-established monitoring systems.

ONLINE RESOURCES >

Map of Trans Murders

Trans Murder Rates by Country

Pakistan is the ninth deadliest country in the world, with 115 trans people murdered since 2008.

FAMILY IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

At Oregano Pizza, the atmosphere is light, and people seem to feel more at ease talking to me now than they when I had interviewed some of

Rawa John.
Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

them at their homes.

Many attendees—some I had interviewed before and others I was meeting for the first time—are dressed up for the occasion.

Shani has opted for a simple white kurta (top) and bottoms with a black dupatta (scarf). Alisha Shirazi, an elegant and confident woman, is dressed in a classy black evening dress. And Honey, a 23-year-old student, wears a bright red suit and shimmery make-up.

Rawa John, the only trans man I met during my trip, is dressed in jeans and a plain shirt. I had met him two days before while interviewing Sherazi at her house. During the interview, John stopped by, and Sherazi encouraged him to talk to me.

With Sherazi, John was relaxed. He teased her, and they engaged in a friendly quarrel over mundane things. But when he sat down to talk to me, he became quieter.

We talked about his childhood experiences and the lack of trans men's voices in Pakistan. John was polite but also shy; he wouldn't look at me, and his answers were short.

Now, at Oregano, surrounded by friends, John speaks more openly about his experiences.

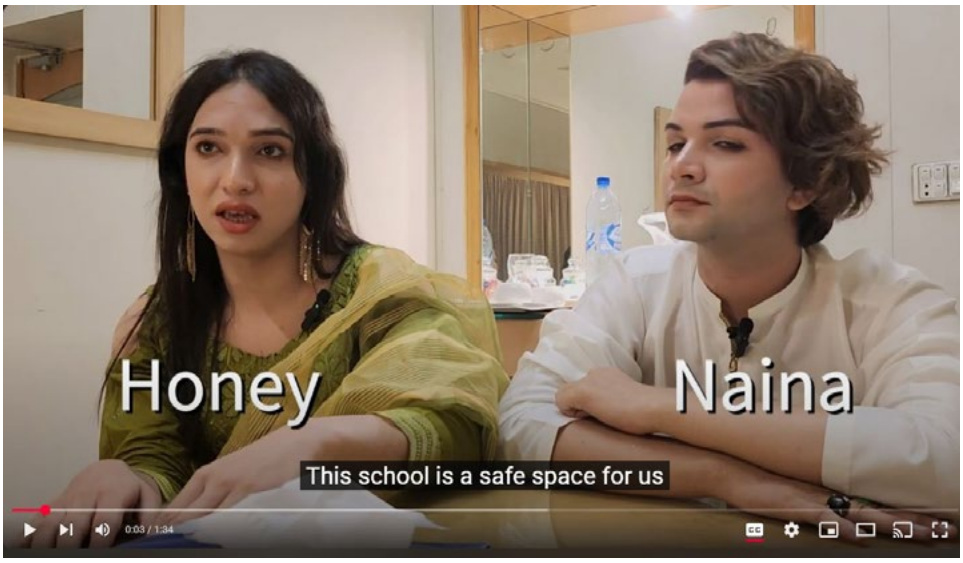
One barrier faced by trans men daily is that "you are required to wear gender-specific clothes" at work, he says.

"Because trans women are more accepted, they can at times wear clothes they are comfortable with, but a trans man often must wear clothes they aren't comfortable with."

Trans women, as members of the Khwaja sira community, have been historically visible. Their roles as important figures during the Mughal period allows some acceptance.

Khwaja sira's presence throughout history has strenghthened their ability to build a strong, cohesive community. This has allowed Khwaja sira to organize and empower each other.

However, while trans women have found some



VIDEO >
Honey, 23, and Naina, 24, talk about their experiences as two of the first students to graduate from Pakistan's first school for transgender students, the Trans Education System.

visibility and acceptance, trans men remain largely invisible and isolated.

In Multan's Khwaja sira community, though, John has found a family.

HEALTH, EDUCATION AND ENFORCEMENT OF THE LAW

Shani wasn't the only member of the Khwaja sira community who felt empowered when she learned the legislation had passed. Just the passing of the bill made many in the community feel more confident in public and private spaces.

Although the government has been slow to enforce the act, Sherazi said Pakistan's trans community and activists have worked relentlessly to improve living standards for trans people.

In 2021, Pakistan opened its first government-run school for transgender students in Multan.

Honey and Naina, two of the first students to graduate from the Trans Education System, wanted to study in a school filled with students of all genders. But they said they feel safer and freer at their new school.

After our meeting at the restaurant, Honey hugged me and said she would like to tell me more about her experiences. We arranged to meet the next day at my hotel.

There, she told me more about her life growing up in a religious family. Her father supported her education but when he passed away just before her Grade 10 exams, life at home changed drastically

As the youngest of nine children, Honey found her siblings increasingly vocal about their dislike for her trans identity. Exhausted by the fights, she ran away from home and moved in with Sherazi, who had become her guru.

A guru is a parental figure who can provide housing and other necessities if a young trans person has been abandoned by their family. They also initiate their chela—the person they have taken under their wing—to the rest of the community, which is difficult for a young trans person to do alone.

There are concerns in Pakistan about gurus exploiting their chelas financially. However, Honey said her guru was a saving grace and the kind of role model she needed and eventually wanted to be.

"She could have, like some other gurus, forced me into begging or sex work," Honey said. "Instead, she sat me down and said, 'If you don't get your degree, all the 10 years you have spent in school would be wasted. Go home, speak up for yourself and complete your education.'"

That's exactly what Honey did, and she said when her brothers saw that she could stand up for herself, they moved out, leaving her with her mother.

Things didn't improve immediately. Now, Honey had to fend for herself and her mother. But with the support of the Khwaja sira community, she overcame depression, continued her education, and became independent.

"I felt like [the transgender school] was our safe space; we could study, eat, and speak the way we wanted. Here, no one was going to harass us," Honey said.

Not everyone has a safe space to learn, though.

Sana Khan is Pakistan's first trans woman to receive an Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) certificate from the United Kingdom. She also has a Bachelor of Science in Applied Accounting from Oxford Brookes University.

She recalled trans kids in Pakistan telling her "I want to study like you" and "I want to succeed like you in a nice office rather than begging."

But, like many in the trans community, Khan faced abuse and discrimination while living and studying in Pakistan.

Khan said a male student liked her during her university years in Pakistan, but when she ignored him he got angry. To some men, Khan explained, transgender people are "public property" and "sex objects."

Infuriated, her harasser and a friend of his kidnapped her. "He physically, sexually and mentally abused me for three days," she recalled.

He recorded it and threatened to leak videos to her family—whose contacts he copied from her phone—if she did not give him money.

After her kidnappers let her go, she said the men did not apologize. Instead, she had to beg them to leave her alone.

Khan said she believed contacting the police wouldn't have helped.

"The police would eventually let them go, and then the men would come for me because I reported them."

To get away from the trauma and the nightmares, she moved to Sydney in 2023. There, she started seeing a psychologist and taking medication. But the healing process was slow.

"I cannot forget those moments…I cannot explain how painful those moments were and still are," Khan said. "I can't move on from that."

She said she has been hospitalized multiple times because of her anxiety and panic attacks.

"I am in a country where everybody respects me (regardless of my) gender; they accept me, they respect me, they love me for what I am," she said.

"The government is very supportive, people are very supportive, people are very good, but I am still suffering from mental health issues."

Khan's experience is not unique. I conducted over 20 interviews for this project and everyone I spoke to either had their own stories or knew of someone who had experienced some form of abuse.

Her lack of trust in law enforcement isn't unique either. Shani said as a trans activist, she has witnessed multiple cases of trans women being abused and very rarely reporting their experiences to the police.

Sherazi said the problem is especially prominent in villages and smaller towns where family members will brutally murder their trans children, sisters, partners and relatives in an act of honour killing—the murder of a family member because the victim is perceived to have brought dishonour on the family.

Other members of the trans community are unable to stop or report abuse due to fear of persecution and a sense of helplessness that is intensified by a lack of support from law enforcement.

The Trans Persons Act promised to introduce sensitivity training for medical and police staff and establish separate prison and confinement cells for trans people.

While Pakistan's government has been slow to meet its promises, the Tahafuz centres represent a breakthrough.

Mahi said the creation of Tahafuz centres like the one where she works in Multan has given trans people hope in the justice system. She said more needs to be done, but the centre is a great start.

Mahi has been a trans activist since 2010. She said before the Tahafuz centre opened, members of the trans community attempted to solve problems amongst themselves. Now, they feel safer going to the police.

She added that police officers are learning to handle vulnerable population cases better.

"The police system is smoother and police officers work faster now," Mahi said. "Things are better and will become even better as time passes."

It wasn't just the justice system that failed Khan after her kidnapping.

After she was kidnapped, Khan said she was anxious and scared all the time. As her

symptoms became worse, she sought help from a psychiatrist. But she said doctors and other staff did not have the sensitivity training needed to help transgender people. They told her to get better, she needed to change her mindset and her trans identity.

Medical facilities, especially mental health departments in Pakistan, are unavailable to most trans people due to a lack of training, regulations or funding, according to Dr. Mehr Adeel Riaz, a Multan physician whose research focuses on trans health.

Riaz, who spoke to me virtually in early 2024, has been involved in multiple projects aimed at making mental health accessible to trans communities. Initially, he offered general trans awareness training to interested medical students. Now, he is working on creating a network of health care professionals willing to provide free services to trans communities around the country.

As co-founders of Satrangi, Shani and her partner provide legal information, educational assistance, and HIV/AIDS awareness to members of the transgender community in Multan. Additionally, Shani provides counselling.

Honey, who relied on Shani after a painful breakup, said she does not think she would have made it without Shani's help.

SOLUTIONS REQUIRE EDUCATION FOR ALL

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act has created meaningful change for trans people in Pakistan. It empowered many to be more confident in their demands, including medical treatment in women's wards or talking to women police officers instead of men.

Although work towards creating trans schools and Tahafuz centres began before the bill was passed in 2018, its enactment motivated trans people and gave them a sense that change was happening.

Since 2018, more trans women have come to the forefront and represented themselves, their community and the country.

In 2020, Aisha Mughal made history as the first legally recognized transgender woman to represent a country at the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in Geneva.

"I think I spoke well. And I got a lot of appreciation from the government and the people of Pakistan," she said. "It was an amazing experience. One of the most beautiful experiences of my life."

Alina Khan is Pakistan's first trans person to play the lead in a movie. In 2022, she made headlines internationally for her film Joyland, which tells the story of a young man and a trans dance performer.

Although banned at home for months—and still banned in the province of Punjab—Joyland was the first Pakistani film to be shortlisted for best international feature film at the Academy Awards. The film also received a standing ovation after its screening at the Cannes Film Festival, winning the festival's Un Certain Regard jury prize and the Queer Palm prize for best LGBTQ+-themed film.

Activists say for progress to continue, Pakistan's government must continue to vocally support the community, fund more projects and speed up promised changes, including sensitivity training in public sectors.

Riaz said the government needs to fund research, especially focused on collecting data on trans people's mental health. He added that they don't have data for simple questions like what mental health issues are most prevalent in the community.

Research findings would inform policy and mental health guidelines for doctors, nurses and other medical staff so they do not continue to ignore or retraumatize their transgender patients.

Bubbli Malik, a transgender activist and speaker during the initial Shariat Court hearings also stressed the importance of gender education in schools and gender sensitivity training in institutions.

Institutions like the Shariat Court and public figures such as religious leaders have immense legal power and the ability to influence public opinion.

Malik suggested religious clerics and leaders of religious parties meet with gender studies experts, medical staff, and psychiatrists to get answers to their questions. Gender sensitivity training and education about gender identity

Shani, Naina, Honey and Izhar. Photo by Yumna Iftikhar.

could help stop the spread of misinformation.

Mughal emphasized the importance of gender education. She added parliamentarians and policymakers must understand what they are arguing to avoid spreading misinformation about the transgender community.

In 2022, Fawzia Arshad, a senator from Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, pushed for a bill that would define transgender people as people who "keep one hole for urination."

While many activists, politicians, and other public members expressed concerns about Arshad's comment and the spread of disinformation, the lack of gender education remains a problem in Pakistan.

As trans activists continue to challenge the Shariat Court's decision at the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Mughal said protecting the act is the first step to moving forward.

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Disclaimer

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Shots fired: A local news desert leads to lack of crime reporting

Coups de feu: l'absence de médias locaux compromet la couverture des faits criminels

Pauline Dakin

ABSTRACT

Based on a shooting incident in Halifax, author Pauline Dakin exposes and critiques a striking lack of local news coverage in certain regions of Canada, bringing to light the potential consequences for public safety as well as for police practices and transparency. In a context where funding for journalism is increasingly scarce, her commentary examines the deep crisis affecting Canadian media and advocates for the revitalization of local journalism as a cornerstone of community life and democratic engagement.

RÉSUMÉ

À partir d'un cas de fusillade à Halifax, l'autrice Pauline Dakine, décrit et dénonce une absence intrigante de couverture médiatique local dans certaines contrées du Canada, mettant met au jour les potentielles répercussions en termes de sécurité publique et de pratiques et transparence policières. Dans un contexte où les fonds dédiés aux médias se font rares, son commentaire examines les affres des médias canadiens avant de plaider pour une revitalisation des médias locaux qui sont en réalité au cœur de la vie des populations.

Photo by Tony Webster (Wikicommons CC 4.0)

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It was about 8:30 p.m. on a Monday night when I heard the shots. Three of them, somewhere just beyond my central Halifax backyard. *Definitely shots*, I thought. The flat-sounding cracks were not from a car backfiring or fireworks.

Soon flashing blue and red lights of several emergency vehicles were visible beyond the houses behind me. Police cars and armed officers were searching along a street bordering a small park that is one of the tent encampments for unhoused people in the city. I started scrolling for news. For several hours I checked the few remaining news sources in the city.

Nothing.

The next morning on my early-morning dog walk around the neighbourhood I saw the evidence of what had happened the previous night; there was a long trail of blood along the sidewalk. Someone had been seriously injured, maybe killed, judging by the amount of blood. By then the police tape that had surrounded the encampment the previous night was gone. Two police vehicles were still on the scene, parked at two corners of the park. I approached one of them.

"So it *was* a shooting," I said to the officer in the SUV, pointing to the blood along the sidewalk.

"So you're still looking for someone then?" I asked.

The officer was friendly but tight-lipped. I finished walking the dog and went home to look for what was being reported about this story.

Still nothing.

Ten hours after it occurred, I could not find a reference to or any coverage of a shooting in a central Halifax neighbourhood in any local news source. In the meantime, the neighbourhood grapevine reported the nearby hospital had been locked down after the shooting, a common precaution when a shooting victim arrives in the emergency room to prevent the possibility of the shooter following to finish the job.

I emailed the morning news editor at CBC Nova Scotia and told him what I knew. Later that morning I heard a mention of the shooting in some brief radio headlines. As I continued to scan local media I eventually found a short story on the site of the local CTV outlet. Relying exclusively on bare-bones information provided by the police, the report stated a man had been taken to hospital with life-threatening injuries and that officers had briefly closed some streets (Lombard, 2024). Saltwire (which is now owned by Postmedia Network) also published a similarly brief story that day (Fairclough, 2024). CTV followed up its story two days later, on Oct. 31, but police declined to do an interview with them and offered no additional information. The CTV story focused on a neighbour of the tent encampment who'd heard the shooting. She said she was shaken, and upset that police had not released any additional details (Arif & Mott, 2024).

Over the next week I continued to search for news on the shooting but found nothing. I eventually emailed the Halifax Regional Police media contact but learned nothing new. The official response remained that a man was taken to hospital with a life-threatening injury, with no additional information (Halifax Regional Police, 2024).

This appears to be emblematic of a culture of police secretiveness that has long been noted by reporters in Halifax and beyond. *The Globe & Mail's* Secret Canada series recently called Halifax an opaque city, finding that the municipality has the lowest rate of full disclosure to freedom of information requests (at two percent) and that it is three times as likely as most cities to release no records, in 68% of requests. The national municipal average is 22% (Cardoso, et al., 2024).

Lisa Taylor is a journalism professor at the University of King's College who has served as both a lawyer and reporter. In her research on issues related to police withholding of information, she's found that Canadian police forces have grown increasingly broad in their exclusion of crime details. For example, withholding victims' names is a relatively new practice, she notes, one that leads frustrated journalists to glean information from social media posts, upping the danger of misinformation at a time when journalism needs public trust (Ridgeway, 2017).

In my case, even though I hadn't even asked for

Photo by Sioban Howerton (Pexels)

identifying information, I still received very little to go on from the police that might ease concerns in my neighbourhood that a shooter was at large.

It seems clear that the lack of transparency on the part of police compounds the effects of a shrinking media corps in the region, the result being less information for the public. The lack of newsroom response to this story of clear public interest may be a result of fewer newsrooms in Halifax, and the dwindling number of reporters in those that still exist. Professor April Lindgren at Toronto Metropolitan University has tracked the state of local journalism across the country since 2008 in her ongoing research. Lindgren found that in Nova Scotia, as of February 2025, 24 media outlets have closed since 2008. In that same period 12 new local outlets opened, for a net loss of 12 (Local News Research Project, 2025).

In a new report on news deprivation in Canadian communities The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives finds that the rate of local news deprivation across the country "is snowballing" despite the federal government's Digital News Tax Credit, the Local Journalism Initiative to support local civic reporting in underserved areas, and the CRTC-created Independent Local News Fund for independently owned television and radio stations. Meanwhile data from the CCPA report shows a ten per cent drop in the number of local news outlets in Halifax since 2008 (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2025).

Many of those that have survived are depleted. In Nova Scotia, the long-time newspaper of record was *The Chronicle Herald*, now owned by Postmedia. According to the Halifax Typographical Union that represents workers at the publication, there are currently 13 multimedia journalists (and three non-unionized managers) in the newsroom (email correspondence, Mar. 13, 2025). That's down from 61 in 2016, an almost 80 per cent decline in less than a decade (HTU, 2016).

Nova Scotia is not alone in that decline. Lindgren and Corbett (2025) show that 529 Canadian news outlets have closed or been closed due to mergers since 2008. The CCPA report finds that "2.5 million Canadians now live in a postal code with only one or no local news outlets" (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2025, p. 3). In the United States., recruiting firm Challenger Gray estimates "at least 2,600 U.S.-based journalism jobs were lost in 2023, with another 500 jobs lost in the first month of 2024" (Angwin, 2024).

Here in Canada, it's not just private newsrooms that have suffered. In a guest column in Howard Law's blog about policy issues in Canadian media, mediapolicy.ca, former CBC vice-president Richard Stursburg offered his advice to the new CBC President Marie-Philippe Bouchard. A key piece of this advice relates to the restoration of local news. He writes:

> All market research indicates that local news is the most important form of news, since it is about the events that directly affect people's lives. Where local news dies, electoral participation falls and local corruption increases. (Stursburg, 2024)

Stursburg recommended that CBC follow through on its promised expansion of local news. On Nov. 12, 2024, CBC had announced a significant expansion of its local news presence, following the CRTC's approval of Google's plan to compensate Canadian news organizations for the use of their news content (CBC News, 2024; CRTC, 2024). More recently, CBC has confirmed it will use the money to hire up to 30 permanent new journalists in 22 underserved communities, with most of the jobs going to B.C. and the Prairies. There will be one new position in Nova Scotia (CBC Media

Centre, 2025).

That's good news for the public broadcaster. But it's cold comfort given the number of reporting jobs that have been lost overall.

In my neighbourhood in Halifax, the upshot is that three shots were fired in a Halifax residential neighbourhood close to a tent encampment and the result was someone had life-threatening injuries, but only three media outlets reported it, in a cursory way. Only one of those outlets attempted to follow the story, with limited success. Between tight-lipped police and an apparent lack of interest in or ability to cover the shooting, people who live in the neighbourhood are left wondering whether a shooter is still in the area, and whether police have any leads or concerns for public safety.

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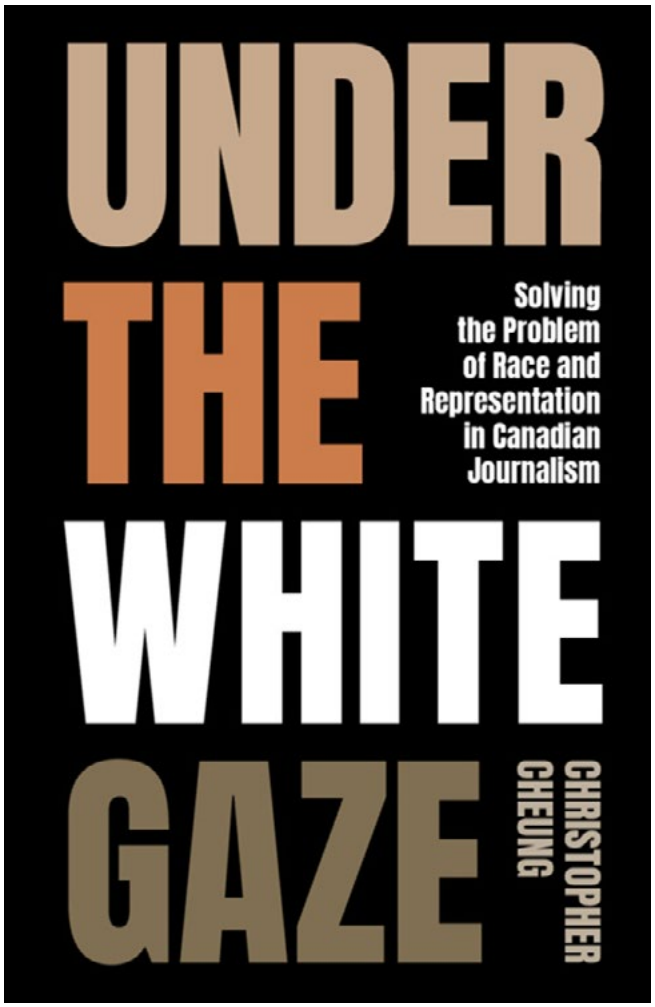
Under the White Gaze: Solving the Problem of Race and Representation in Canadian Journalism

Christopher Cheung
UBC Press, Purich Books, 2024
(288 pp.)

Review by Shenaz Kermalli



Issues around race and representation—often dismissed by some on the right as 'identity politics' in the context of populist discourse around governmental policies that regulate mobility and opportunity—are central in Canadian journalism. Debates around class reductionism or right-wing nationalist agendas that exclude ethnic "others" highlight the complexities of inclusion in media narratives.

While dynamic initiatives are emerging to confront traditional Euro-centric approaches to journalism—from a new course at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies exploring decolonization through the lens of Indigenous, Black, francophone and Global South communities, to the launch of the new Mary Ann Shadd Cary Centre for Journalism and Belonging at Carleton University—scholarly literature on the intersection of representation, intersectionality, and decolonization in shaping journalism ethics and practices remain relatively rare.

Recent essential works that are on class reading lists already include: Desmond Cole's *The Skin We're In* (2022), Duncan McCue's *Decolonizing Journalism* (2022), and Candis Callison and Mary Lynn Young's *Reckoning: Journalism's Limits and Possibilities* (2020).

Now added to the list is Christopher Cheung's *Under the White Gaze* (2024), which references each of the above books. As a Chinese-Canadian journalist for one of Canada's earliest online news sources, BC-based The Tyee, Cheung's name is familiar to educators and journalists nationally after *The Toronto Star* published his award-winning essay, "Blind Spots," in 2022. Cheung

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argued that journalists often fail to cover stories outside their familiar cultural circles, akin to how certain neighbourhoods in Vancouver with rich immigrant histories are often dismissed as undesirable until rebranded by predominantly White business interests. The invisibility and gentrification of cycles like this often result in racialized places and communities being either excluded from mainstream narratives or scrutinized through a Eurocentric lens—the very essence of the White gaze.

With easy, personable prose and an honest, thoughtful approach, Cheung brings depth and humanity to a topic too often dismissed under the broad label of "diversity." Early on, he acknowledges his own susceptibility to the White gaze, highlighting a crucial first step toward meaningful change in the industry: the willingness of journalists to self-reflect and turn the microphone on themselves. By critiquing his own reporting, he models the humility he asks of his readers: "I treated white Canadians of European descent as the default viewpoint," he writes. "They were the baseline. They were the 'us' and everyone else was the 'other'" (p. 8).

> Among my early stories were inspirational ones about model minority immigrants who sacrificed themselves by working 365 days a year. I wrote stories about 'ethnic' food as if they were exotic finds rather than the everyday eats of people from the cultures they belonged to. (Cheung, 2024, p. 22)

Importantly, Cheung points out that these narratives didn't provoke concern from readers, editors, or even himself, because they are so normalized. The harm here, he adds, is that such practices lead us to believe we are challenging the dominance of Whiteness in journalism. This is where the White gaze manifests. In choosing language and topics to cater to a select audience, Cheung (2024) describes himself as "an unknowing tour guide," often omitting unfamiliar details or over-explaining for readers' benefit (p. 22). As a result, the lives of racialized people are being viewed from a distance, their experiences not fully conveyed from their own perspectives. "The problem is not whether cultures are covered, but how they are covered," he argues (p. 82), humorously likening Canadian editorial coverage of community festivals to a Lonely Planet guide. "Journalists should of course introduce a holiday to audiences who are unfamiliar with it, but they should also cover the holiday for those who do celebrate it" (p. 82).

In an ode to CBC journalist and Carleton University professor Duncan McCue's widely-known "Five Ds" that sum up stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, Cheung constructs his own mnemonic to capture common tropes of racialized people:

> '**D**arlings' - model minorities who are celebrated;
>
> '**D**eviants' - people of colour who have their behaviour racialized, whether the behaviour is bad or perceived as bad;
>
> '**D**amaged' - sad and suffering people of colour; and
>
> '**D**elicious' - cultures for consumption. (Cheung, 2024, p. 49)

Cheung offers rich context to illustrate how each of these stereotypes manifest, even concluding with a section questioning the fairness of being so critical about these Ds. Iterating that while there is nothing wrong with covering stories that reflect any of them, Cheung urges media workers to consider how they are being used: Does the audience learn anything new? Are the stories reductive or do they complexify certain issues? Is the representation of racialized people a sanitized vision of 'diversity without oppression'?

Anyone who reads Cheung's book will likely recognize—and perhaps cringe at—the missteps they've made in their own reporting (myself included). What struck me most however were his opening remarks, where he plainly acknowledges that despite having been a journalist for only a decade, reaching that milestone is remarkable given how many racialized individuals leave the industry within just a few years. It's a sobering, painful truth.

Many who leave cite the precarious nature of the work; others point to racial toxicity in newsrooms. More recently, former senior producers have

highlighted management's failure to address accusations of pro-Israel bias (Schumann, 2024) and the suppression of pro-Palestinian perspectives in covering Israel's on-going genocide in Gaza (Kermalli, 2023). Despite recent efforts to improve representation and awareness in journalism, progress remains slow.

Journalists are often at their best when they have years of experience behind them, making the industry's high turnover rate deeply concerning. Unfortunately, the Canadian public is worse off for it. Books like Cheung's aren't just valuable; they are essential. They must be studied, debated, and deeply engaged in journalism, communications, sociology, and political science classrooms—and beyond. The future of fair and inclusive reporting depends on it.

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Quoteworthy

Just as we can't talk about reconciliation without talking about colonization we can't talk about diversity in journalism without talking about whiteness. It's easy for newsrooms to say that they want to diversify, but what exactly are they diversifying from? If diversity is one side of the coin, whiteness is the other." (Cheung, 2024, p. 11)

"Rather than simply reporting a story, I've felt like I'm playing chess, having to anticipate how the opposing side might react. It's caused me to abandon stories or fill them with unnecessary details in hopes of preventing outrage from white readers." (p. 42)

"I took on the white gaze in everything from my language choices to my story frames. I treated white Canadians of European descent as the default viewpoint. They were the baseline. They were the 'us' and everyone else was the 'other.' When writing about non-Western cultures, I'd go to great lengths to explain them to a white audience, reporting on them with an air of discovery and distance, padding my stories with little encyclopaedia entries." (p.8)

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