

Wonks and War Rooms

S04E07 - Journalism and Online Harassment with Rosemary Barton, Fatima Syed and Mark Blackburn

Episode Transcript

Elizabeth: [00:00:04] Welcome to [Wonks and War Rooms](#), where political communication theory meets on-the-ground strategy. I'm your host [Elizabeth Dubois](#). I'm an associate professor at the [University of Ottawa](#), and my pronouns are she/her. And in today's episode, we're actually releasing the audio from a [special live event](#) we hosted back on March 22nd. In this event, we were talking about the mean tweets journalists face and more broadly, [online harassment](#) and what it means for our democracy. I chatted with three journalists and we had a great discussion, which I am excited to share with you today. So without further ado, I'll hand it over to Rosemary Barton to introduce herself.

Rosemary : [00:00:49] Hi. Yeah, I am [Rosemary Barton](#). I'm the chief political correspondent at CBC News. I'm also the host of the weekly political panel on The National called Ad Issue. And I'm also host of my own program, Rosemary Barton Live, which airs on Sunday mornings. I started my career as a journalist in Quebec, actually, and that's where I also got into politics covering Bernard Landry and Jean Charest version 1.0 or 2.0 maybe, and made my way to Ottawa about I'm very bad with years, maybe 15 years ago and after this I really need to get my butt to work because there's a lot happening today.

Elizabeth: [00:01:32] Thank you. Yeah. Not exactly a slow news day by any means. Also, Rosemary Barton is currently [trending on Twitter](#) for fun reasons. Who knows? Thank you for that intro. I'll hand it over to [Fatima Syed](#) now.

Fatima: [00:01:45] Hi. I'm a reporter at the Narwhal and host of the [Backbench Podcast](#), a podcast about Canadian politics on the CANADALAND Network. I'm also the Vice

President of the Association of Journalists, so this topic is top of mind for personal and professional reasons, and I'm glad to be part of the conversation.

Elizabeth: [00:02:06] Thank you so much. And then Mark Blackburn.

Mark: [00:02:09] All right. Thanks for having me. My name is [Mark Blackburn](#). I'm the social media producer and online producer at [APTN News](#). And one of my jobs is to moderate comments coming into our Facebook, our Facebook page and all our other social media platforms. So I see a lot of what we're going to be talking about today.

Elizabeth: [00:02:29] Thank you. I am so excited to have you all here. I think you each come from these really interesting and different perspectives and I think that's really going to make for a really helpful, useful, lively conversation. So I want to kick it off the same way I kick off basically every Wonks and War Rooms episode with a little bit of definitional work. So when we're talking about [online harassment or a negativity or incivility or hate speech or any of these other words](#) that all kind of get jumbled together, there are these slight differences between them, but there are also these kind of academic works which argue that generally the issue is just like negativity broadly online.

[00:03:13] And so what I want to do is actually start off by hearing from each of you and I'll go, Fatima, then Mark, then Rosemary. I want to hear from each of you how you categorize or think about the negativity that you see online. Are there particular words you use to describe it or define it? Are there ways that you kind of bucket it up and that, I hope, is going to get us on the same page so we can have a good conversation about what it is we actually mean when we're talking about mean tweets or mean Facebook posts or whatever else. So let's start off with Fatima.

Fatima: [00:03:48] Okay. No pressure. I think for me, the sort of the borderline, as it were, is what is hateful and what is not hateful. For me, that's been the biggest concern. And you can usually identify online discourse just by the words that are being used against you and distinguish it between just a tweet or a post that is criticizing your work.

And, you know, either what's written or what you're doing versus something that's attacking you for racist or sexist reasons. And the latter is obviously more concerning. But that's always been the line that I draw between what worries me and what I don't care about. Because there's always going to be people who are unhappy with what you write and disagree with, with your reporting. And I think that's normal in any sort of political and public discourse. But when it veers towards hateful rhetoric, that's when I start getting concerned and that's when my life starts becoming difficult.

Elizabeth: [00:04:52] Thank you. Yeah, I think that distinction between hate and other kinds of negativity is really useful, particularly when we come from, like, legal contexts to which maybe we'll get into a little later. Let's go to Mark next.

Mark: [00:05:06] Yeah. It's interesting. At APTN, I haven't had a lot of reports of reporters saying they're experiencing online attacks and that sort of thing, most of them. I mean, you can call it negativity. You can call it incivility or anything. I mean, I call it a lack of education and racism. Essentially, the comments that are coming into our pages, the messages coming into our Facebook inbox and on YouTube are mostly about complaints from people who don't understand, for instance, the treaty process. They don't understand the relationship between indigenous peoples and the Canadian government. So that's really where the negativity, a lack of education, a lack of awareness and racism really come into play. So it's less personal and it's more based on the subject of our stories rather than, let's say, attacks on our reporters. That slightly I guess we're going to get into the whole [protest in Ottawa](#) because that completely changed a lot of things for us and I guess we'll get into that later. But just initially, using the words incivility or negativity, you know, I have other words for it and it's a lack of education and racism and that sort of thing.

[Editor's note: For an example of APTN's coverage of the Ottawa Freedom Convoy protest, [see this article](#).]

Elizabeth: [00:06:24] Thank you. Yeah. That's really helpful to start bringing out those examples and distinguishing between personal attacks versus attacks on content and the kind of education you might need to respond to those things might be quite different.

Mark: [00:06:39] Yeah. You know, like, sorry, I don't want to cut in on Rosie's time, but for instance, you know, there was especially during the Ottawa protest, we got quite a few messages in effect of know why don't you go open up another bottle. So those are more personal attacks rather than attacks on the content. But we can get into that later as well.

Elizabeth: [00:06:59] Yeah. Lots to dig into. Let's go to Rosemary first and then. Then we'll come back.

Rosemary : [00:07:03] Yeah. Mine are probably just quite the opposite of what Mark said. Mine are very personalized. They are attacks on me, which isn't surprising given the profile that I have and given that I work for the public broadcaster. Those are sort of and that I cover politics. Those are all sort of big, big red flags for anyone that wants to come after me like Fatima. I'm perfectly fine to accept criticism, even really hard criticism about my work. That doesn't that doesn't bother me much. It's the other stuff. And there I wouldn't say it's incivility or I would say it's abusive, misogynistic, harassment, threatening. All of those kinds of words would be how I would characterize the kind of abuse online that I have experienced. And I'm certainly not the only person, but that's been my experience. I think it's because I am at a sort of a focus point for political coverage, and we can talk more about how that's changed over time, certainly. But so you get very, very strong views because there are people who have strong political views. I would also say there's a difference between [trolling](#), which, you know, I certainly am subject to when it comes to different groups or political parties or supporters of those parties versus straight abuse and harassment, which is a different category in my mind.

Elizabeth: [00:08:35] Yeah. There's a lot of different things that you bring up there to kind of unpack. And I want to kind of start where you just left off, like the idea of trolling

versus other kinds of abuse. And let's dig into that a little bit like trolling at one point was defined as like doing it for the LOLs, right? Like just trying to get a rise out of someone, trying to make some kind of emotional push. And now we're starting to see more conversations that kind of connect the idea of trolling to targeted political campaigns like they are political tactics. They are specific efforts to mobilize people in a particular way. So first off, Rosie, is that how you were defining trolling there?

Rosemary : [00:09:16] Yeah, for sure. And I would say that in in the early days of my experience on social media and perhaps the early days of trolling, I fell prey to that often that I was baited into conversations that weren't really conversations, attacks on me and constantly going back and forth and defending myself, which is not something that that I engage in anymore. Frankly, I might if it's someone that I know or someone credible or, you know, I don't know a politician, I might engage with them, but I don't allow myself to be baited by that. But I did for sure in the beginning that that is a constant. As you say, that's kind of the goal of trolling.

Elizabeth: [00:09:54] Yeah. Yeah, I see Fatima nodding a little bit. Do you think about who is sending the meanness, the negativity, the abuse, all of those different things and and does who is sending it impact how you respond?

Fatima: [00:10:08] It does. But I think after several years of being on social media and it ramping up to the point that it has, you kind of learned to tune it out and the few that break through and there are various means to do that, right. You can now change your reply so that only credible people with verified accounts can respond or people that you follow can respond. That's really helpful. You can mute accounts that are considered troll accounts and avoid the discourse entirely that they're spewing at you. So there are good technical ways to protect yourself now, which is really helpful. But then there are also cases where some people just get through all of those barriers and come at you anyway. And it depends on what they say. You know, if it is something extremely threatening and worrying and concerning, then sure, I will Google that person, try and figure out if they're real, if they're not real, and use my journalism skills to protect myself.

[00:11:09] On the other hand, if it's just some random email because you can just read the email or you can read the account and see whether they're a real person or not a real person. You can just ignore them and know what it is. Unfortunately, I think there is a greater onus for journalists and commentators who are online now to do some of that legwork. And I know newsrooms are stepping up now to try and offer that assist, but we haven't caught we're not there yet where newsrooms are taking the bulk of that work. It is still on the individual journalist to do all of that legwork with hopefully a community of friends around him or her and figure out if this person is actually going to do something about what they're saying or if they're just saying it for the sake of saying it.

Elizabeth: [00:11:55] Thank you. Yeah. That brings up some really interesting points, one of which is this idea of how much of it is on the individual journalists versus how much of it can be on the employer or on a larger community. That kind of connection. It makes me wonder, Mark, how much of your job ends up being helping kind of navigate that type of problematic content?

Mark: [00:12:19] Well, one of the things in our social media policy is for reporters and especially it's an important point for young reporters, is : Don't engage. You're not going to win. You're not going to feel any better at the end of it. So just don't engage. You mentioned a number of on Twitter, a number of devices that you can do. You can mute someone. You can block someone. So just do your story. Go with the facts that you've that you know, and let your story stand for itself. But just like the main one is, do not engage because you're not going to win. I mean, sometimes the conversations are amusing or interesting to deal with. But, you know, a lot of the stuff you see on Twitter, I mean, it's just it's just a pit and you'll never climb out of it. So don't go there to begin with.

Elizabeth: [00:13:08] Yeah. That's sort of like just don't feed the trolls advice. It sounds like it's common. I'm seeing nods from all of you so that makes a lot of sense. But it makes me wonder, like, how do you build a personal brand? And that following, which seems to be useful for journalists, particularly freelancers, young journalists who are trying to break in, you know, getting attention online and getting recognition can be

really helpful for a career. So how do you balance that idea of like just don't engage with but you also have things you need to do to get your stories on the screens of audiences? Open question. Whoever wants to hop in.

Fatima: [00:13:50] I get asked this a lot and my answer is always just do good journalism. Just let the work speak for itself. You don't have to like fish for followers. I don't know about everyone, but I don't do it for the followers. I'm doing it for good journalism. I'm using Twitter almost as I thought Facebook would be, which is as a networking platform to find sources, to find ideas, to find story pitches, and to share in the discourse about whatever it is I'm covering. And I've always said this like good journalism goes a long way and people recognize good journalism for what it is. And that's all you need to do. At the end of the day, the criticism, the hate, unfortunately, is a byproduct of just being on this complicated means of communication that is social media. But it shouldn't prevent us from doing our job, which is to strengthen and bolster and move forward public discourse.

Rosemary : [00:14:51] I mean, I largely agree that that's what gets you attention. I don't know if that's why I'm trending. I'm hoping it's a different Rosie. But, you know, when Vassy, my colleague, broke that story last night about this deal, I mean, you know, my Twitter exploded when I tweeted it because it was breaking news. It's a big story. That's all you need. The only place where I would differ from Fatima is I do think it's important to show some personality online. I think Fatima does it personally. She doesn't realize it. But in your social media either, whether it be, you know, retweeting a colleague's story, engaging in funny banter with a friend of yours who's a reporter, too, just showing a little bit of humanity that that's important.

[00:15:37] Part of what I think of is journalism. I think everyone here probably does that. So I think allowing a bit of yourself to bleed in is good. I think that I've had to dial it back a little bit over the years as I became better known and got more followers. Because the more you expose your private life and things about you, the more vulnerable you make yourself. It is a hard lesson I've had to learn, so it is a fine line. I try to keep it really solely about me, not things around me or people around me or family or anything. But I

do think that people want to relate to you. They want to engage with you. They want to feel like they know you for better or for worse. And that's helpful, too. And that that should just be something I think that comes pretty naturally to us.

Mark: [00:16:28] Yeah. I think that one of the rules of social media is to have people to converse back and forth. And I agree with all your points and that the key is just don't get into those conversations that are going to turn dark. There's like I mentioned earlier, there's just no use in it. So, yeah, be yourself and and, you know, use your story, use the facts that you've gathered to put out there and converse and and talk to people who want to talk to you, not the ones who want to talk at you and tell you what you're doing wrong, etc..

Elizabeth: [00:17:04] Yeah. It seems like trying to figure out who those people are might be challenging. Is it obvious from the beginning of a conversation when it's going to go dark versus when those are people who, you know, might be willing to engage in really useful, productive, civil kind of discussions.

Mark: [00:17:23] Um, you know, I'll tell you a story because I actually, I guess, about social media policy where I tweeted out, I think this is when Trudeau went surfing rather than going to Kamloops to the residential school ceremony. And so I sent an email to the PMO asking for a comment of some sort and so it came out later that they did make a comment, they didn't send it to us and I put it on Twitter, you know, I wrote to the PMO to write to the Prime Minister. I think I put and, and I never heard anything back. And then someone wrote me saying, "Oh, so the Prime Minister's got time to write to you one single person." And it kind of took me back. The Prime Minister - Well, no, he has stopped and then it went on. I went, Oh, never mind. And I just, I just block them so or I muted them and I went on with my life. So I did look up their profile and they had no followers. I think they were following 14 people. And so that to me is just someone who's just out there trolling.

Rosemary : [00:18:35] Yeah, I'm not sure. You know. So I would say that I don't engage very often, to be frank. It's just it's just not worth my time anymore. I'm focused on my

job, which is getting the news and putting the news out there and analyzing a situation or bringing context to it.

[00:18:52] So I don't engage very often. I do get I know this is about social media. I do get direct emails, which is a thing, a problem. I do get mail that someone now has to filter through. There are special filters that CBC has put on my Twitter account, like beyond what Twitter provides. But I would say the other thing I've noticed, I don't know if my colleagues have noticed, but Instagram is increasingly becoming hateful too, which is surprising to me, because that seemed to be my place where I could just go and post kind of meaningless things like my shoes. But around the election and then the convoy, I would say it suddenly became a place where people were being very abusive there as well, which is kind of unfortunate because I thought maybe we had one little haven left, but I would say that's not the case.

Mark: [00:19:45] Now, it's sad to hear that because Instagram I use as an art form, not as a news form. So that's sad to hear. Yeah.

Fatima: [00:19:54] See, I keep my Instagram private for this reason because I need one place away from it.

Mark: [00:19:59] Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Rosemary : [00:20:00] Smart. Smart.

Elizabeth: [00:20:02] Yeah. I think it's interesting to see how different platforms kind of become places for different kinds of interaction and like the social norms on those platforms sort of shift and change. And I wonder if any of those shifts are related to the technical changes on things like Twitter or Facebook, where now there's more ability to kind of put up barriers to and protect yourself from a lot of this hate and abuse and all of that. And so it makes me wonder whether Instagram doesn't have as many protections and therefore is an easier place to go. Like if you're using it as a tactic, then that's a better place to go because it's easier for you to get this content there.

Rosemary : [00:20:48] Yeah, I think that's true. I think it's also harder to mute people and block people and restrict comments there for sure. I also think and again, I know we're going to talk about the convoy and stuff, but I also think through the pandemic, more people were online, obviously. Right. And I think more people were feeling isolated. I do believe that that led to further polarization in the country and your political views. You went down looking for certain points of view that were aligned with yours. So it's not surprising to me that some of this has ramped up over the past two, two and a half years, because I just think there were people with not a lot to do and not a lot of ways to interact with other human beings. Right. And so that leads to wonderfully productive things and it leads to the things we're talking about as well.

Elizabeth: [00:21:35] Yeah totally and the kind of wider social context us in a pandemic spending a lot of time and energy online even if particular particular people's views weren't polarized. The amount of time they're spending in online spaces and engaging in those spaces has just increased. And so, of course, we're going to see [shifts in the kinds of information](#) out there. I'll take this as a moment to just put a plug in for the podcast. We make annotated transcripts of all of our episodes. And so when we have things like that, like increased polarization or those kinds of things, we go in and we try to find studies that support or contradict or give nuance to those sorts of things. So check out the podcast transcripts when this episode comes out, because we will be giving you extra academic resources to support what we've been talking about.

[00:22:27] And I actually want to take this opportunity to switch gears a little bit. Let's talk about the context of those kinds of major media events like elections or the convoy or other, you know, breaking news events, when all of a sudden there's a lot more attention focused on journalists. There's also a lot more need in Democratic theory, at least, and I personally believe a lot more need for good journalism, because we need facts, we need information from credible sources. And sometimes these kinds of negative attacks are meant to discredit journalists specifically, like the goal is not actually to debate facts or even offer opinions, but it's to say, don't trust this source for one reason or another. And so I wanted to yeah. Throw that idea out to you, see what

your read on the situation is, see if you do feel like there's a difference between those high impact moments versus kind of the day to day.

Fatima: [00:23:26] I mean, I know Mark brought this up, but the convoy was a turning point in this like before. I think I would agree with you where there were particular moments or news hits that if you were involved in the reporting of it, you'd be facing an onslaught of just responses. I know for me that was like the Christchurch shooting or the entire carbon tax saga where I was just constantly bombarded with criticism and hate from all sides. The election is always, always a hot spot for this kind of commentary, but now it's just constant. Like, I don't go like a day without getting something, and I'm sure Rosie probably gets more than me. And what's interesting about it is it always mentions Trudeau. It always mentions like a government, and it always sort of implies that I'm working for a particular self motivated or government motivated purpose. And, you know, as someone who's been thinking about this a lot, I wonder, you know, it always comes back to media literacy for me. Like, I think people just don't understand how journalism works. And despite my best efforts to sometimes debunk it or talk about it or just shed some light on hate, it's very hard to cut through that discourse and actually tell the person who is sending this hate that, hey, I think you don't understand how my job works. I think you don't understand who I am and how I work, and you're just attacking it based on something.

[00:25:01] I also think it doesn't help that we now have politicians, unfortunately, who are weaponizing, quote unquote, the media and saying that, oh, they're not doing their job right and so forth. It's a big problem with no easy solutions, but it is something that hurts journalists everyday, especially journalists of color, and makes doing the job a little more difficult.

Mark: [00:25:22] Yeah, one of the things that came out of the protest was that there were a lot of people who had their own facts. You know, when I walked across Wellington Street and just talking to people they know they have their facts and they're not moving from that. And so there was no difference between going down to Wellington Street and talking to people there then what we were finding on our social media

platforms. So a couple of things happened during the protest. One, we were actually called fake news for the first time, and that was a new thing for me. We had never been called fake news before and there was a lot of disinformation coming across our pages about APTN. One, we're government funded and we're not. And the other thing was that people were spitting out information on our pages that we couldn't verify that they were - I don't know what sources they were using.

[00:26:19] So we closed off. We ended up closing off comments on every protest story just because we couldn't keep up with the hundreds of comments about our work and about the information people were sharing. So then people started messaging our inbox. And so now I'm answering hundreds of messages with people spitting out various pieces of information and that sort of thing. So the protest was kind of interesting online and in person kind of came together like the information that you got down on the street was the same information or the same kind of comments that you were getting online.

Rosemary : [00:26:59] Yeah, again, I mean, I do. I mean, obviously, a lot of this is because of Donald Trump. But we're not going to go all the way back there. But but I also I do, again, think the pandemic is is a lot of this as well, because even through the pandemic, as we went through it, you know, we went from I felt in the beginning of it, maybe the first six, six months, maybe to a year, there was a lot of online sort of support and encouragement and people in this together. And then it sort of flipped on its head, I would say, around the time that vaccines became available. So, you know, I obviously the convoy is a lot of it was built in an anti-vax movement or distrust and mistrust of government and media, just generally institutions.

[00:27:45] And so I think that the convoy in some ways sort of exposed what had been brewing in the country through the pandemic and possibly before with other issues around [Western isolation](#), alienation and things like that. And that, of course, makes it very challenging to do our jobs, you know, CBC because it's a big machine, does some polling and work on this stuff. And our brand still continues to be a very trusted brand in the news. But because we are publicly funded, unlike Mark, there is, as Fatima was suggesting, a suggestion obviously that we are at the government's beck and call that

we are only. Certain things that we know. And then that's where things get really abusive and misogynistic about me and the prime minister and things I'm not going to repeat here. But, you know. And how do you manage that? I think back to Fatima's point, you do get journalism and then increasingly, I think you are transparent about how that journalism is being done. I talked to three sources who told me this or I've been working, you know, just things like that, that sort of start to explain to an audience how you're doing your job, the kinds of people you're talking to if you can't reveal the sources and just how hard you've been working to bring something to them, I think sometimes that that can go a long way.

[Editor's note: Academic research sometimes counters this claim that increased transparency in journalism can be a remedy for declining trust in the industry. [See this article for an example.](#)]

[00:29:14] It's not going to deal with everything, obviously. But if we're trying to explain to people how we're doing our jobs and why they should trust us, sometimes that kind of stuff helps build up people's confidence in you. I find often when someone emails me directly about something and I write back to them and say, Actually, this is what was happening here and this is why I said that, that that person inevitably apologizes, like almost always apologizes because then they're like, "Oh, okay, I see now what you're talking about." So that's one of the tools I use.

Mark: [00:29:49] Of, I would say, you know, 90% of the people that I engaged with on our Facebook and YouTube pages who claimed we were fake news or owned by the government or whatever, 90% didn't want to hear any of it. And 10% said, "Oh, I didn't know that", you know, "I thought you were government funded" or whatever. So they're a very small percentage of people who would acknowledge that the information they had was erroneous. And then the rest of them, just like I mentioned, they have their own information and they have their own sources and they're not moving from it.

Elizabeth: [00:30:25] Yeah. And it's really hard to admit that you were wrong or that you were misled or that you encountered disinformation that convinced you of something

that turned out not to be true. So it's not surprising to me that there would be a low percentage of people who do that. But it is so encouraging to hear that there are some people who really are going to benefit from added media literacy. Right. The what you were talking about, Rosie, of adding in this is how I came to this conclusion and explaining that work of journalism seems like it could go a long way for. Yes, a small portion of all of that terribleness online, but even a small portion is better than no portion, I would say.

Mark: [00:31:07] Mm hmm. The other thing, too, is that we have an incredibly engaged audience with very insightful comments on our Facebook page. And so we can't afford to have a lot of the trash that came in through the trucker's protest. I mean, we always get some comments that are questionable, whether the comment is deleted or it's hidden or the person is banned or. But it is really important that we get questionable comments off our page as soon as possible, because we also hear from our audience about those kinds of comments.

Elizabeth: [00:31:41] Yeah, that's a really great point and it transitions perfectly into the next thing I was hoping to chat about, which is like, what's the impact of this type of negativity on the wider public, on the folks who are your audience members and your community members? And so it's really interesting to hear you say, you know, it's an intentional effort to basically create a space where your readers and listeners and viewers want to engage and want to go back to get more and more information. And then kind of thinking about the context of like the public broadcaster, where there's then questions of like, well, if it's publicly funded money, do you get to say who is allowed in that space or not?

Rosemary : [00:32:24] I mean, that's sort of above my pay grade. To be frank.

Elizabeth: [00:32:26] Fair.

[Editor's Note: There is a big debate about CBC turning off comments. For example, see [this Toronto Star article](#) and [this National Post Article.](#)]

Rosemary : [00:32:28] I mean, there are stories and moments where we shut off comments for the same reasons that Mark was talking about there. Unfortunately, a lot of those stories do tend to be about indigenous issues, to be frank. And so there are moments where we turn off comments on Facebook or on particular stories where we know it's just not going to be a helpful conversation. Yeah, I mean, I don't really feel like it's my job to make sure that the world is having that conversation. My job is to present information that allows them to have the conversation. And certainly I want it to be based on facts and truth. And that's the sort of point of view that I'm going to push, like the real story and the real information and hope that they can have that conversation in that space. You know, a lot of people try to engage with me in positive ways so I don't want to portray it all as negative. It's more negative than positive, frankly, because positive people are just there reading and doing. They're going about their days. They don't need to send me tweets. But there are people who do occasionally send me lovely comments and stuff. And, you know, I think that just reminds you that there are people who value your work and that is important for us to remember as well.

Mark: [00:33:51] Absolutely. Yeah.

Fatima: [00:33:53] I don't know whether I can articulate what impact this has on the wider public, but I will say that it does have a [chilling effect](#) on certain individuals who are participating in social media. And as someone who is often thought about like, should I just leave Twitter at certain moments of my career because it just got too bad and too dark and too distressing? That's hard because, you know, for many different reasons. You know, there's not a lot of journalists of color in the industry who are trying to change narratives and provide different perspectives. You know, you bring a diversity of your own community and yourself to your stories, whether people like it or not. And that's valuable depending on what story, whether it is political or otherwise.

[00:34:39] But it's hard to do that when people are just not accepting of it. You know, when people's immediate reaction was like, No, we reject this immediately, like, how dare you question Andrew Scheer for putting out a really dumb statement on

Christchurch that doesn't even mention mosques or Muslim people. Like, No. That's hard. There are, you know, as much as I want to push and I know many journalists want to push the discourse and help it evolve and move beyond what it has traditionally been. It is a huge challenge and it takes a huge personal toll at times. And that's not and that shouldn't be rather on me to handle and to fix. You know, I would like to see and I know newsrooms are having this conversation internally and together. I would like to see newsrooms to pick up the slack, to start pressuring social media platforms, to pick up their role in this and figure out what can actually make for good, constructive, yes, differing public discourse, but one that actually engages with ideas and policies, not in personal attacks and not in attacks for the sake of attacks.

[00:35:52] Like I think everyone has said, criticism is great. Like, obviously, we're not robots. We're not all, we don't all think the same way. We don't all believe the same thing. That is fine. But we can have that conversation without hurting each other as sort of rah rah as that sounds. I don't know how to do that online, but I can think of a few instances where I've been lucky. You know, I talked to an ex-PPC voter last year that went really well and I was very surprised by that. I've had a couple of other private conversations with people who have started with extremely strong views against what I was doing, and then we became like frenemies because we were able to talk about it. But those are really rare. And for me, as we see politics and public discourse become more polarized, it worries me that there are journalists who are too scared to sort of wade in, too scared to even share their stories. And I don't think that's good for public discourse, and I don't think that's good for anyone who's sitting wherever they're sitting in their little basement or studies or whatever, just like looking for the person they disagree with to attack. But that's a very long rant that I'll end there.

Rosemary : [00:37:03] No, it's a good one, though. It was a good one. I mean, I think that is a concern sort of the chilling effect of social media, even on journalists, like how many times are you going to correct a politician's tweet that is wrong? Like, how many times are you going to do that? And then what is the consequence of you doing that or calling someone out on something. And I will say, you know, I come from a place of privilege. I'm a white woman at a big media organization with a lot of support. Now I am

a woman. So that becomes an issue for me, for sure. But it is much easier for me, given the amount of people behind me and the operation behind me and the platform, I have to say, "No, that's not true." It's much harder for someone starting out at a smaller organization, a person of color, to do what their job is, to say that is not true. Here's what is true much, much harder.

[00:38:01] And I like that too much. I don't know how you move that forward beyond, you know, diversifying newsrooms further, which certainly we're seeing happen and is critically important. But I don't know how you as an individual take that on and I don't know how you change that space just with your own voice. I think I think that's really, really a huge challenge.

Mark: [00:38:25] Well, I guess, you know, in terms of politicians saying putting out false information, you know, it's Twitter's job to look at that and say you can't keep spitting out false information. I mean, they ban Trump, you know, is that something that Twitter needs to be more on top of in Canada, around the world?

Elizabeth: [00:38:48] Yeah, I think that's a really great question. And I see, Rosemary, you want to hop in on that, so I'll hand it to you.

Rosemary : [00:38:55] Well, I was just going to say, I mean, and I think Fatima mentioned this, we do have conversations. There are media organizations that are having conversations with Twitter and Instagram and Facebook, because I think that they are starting to get that. It doesn't help them for that to be allowed to continue. At the same time, you know, is their full time job sort of policing people's speech? I don't know. Is it my job? No. So like, at what point are you willing to correct information versus I mean, I could be doing that around the clock, frankly, on Twitter. That could be my full time job.

Mark: [00:39:35] Well, I guess I guess it is my job in part. And I do engage with some people and then some people their comments are so outrageous. But politicians don't come to our site and they don't comment on our stories. I will note, though, that our

Ottawa based reporter Brett Forrester wrote a story about the protest, comparing it to 1492 Land Back Lane in Six Nations and what happened on Wet'suwet'en territory and compared to what was happening in Ottawa, included the comments from Andrew Scheer and Pierre Poilievre about what happened in Tyendinaga in support of the Wet'suwet'en saying they "These Aboriginal people of privilege can't be cutting off people's, you know, cutting off people's livelihood, etc." And then compared to what happened today, he was getting personal attacks on our pages, which I found really interesting.

[00:40:36] And so I was responding to those comments because it's my job and depending on what they wrote back, I would just delete it or whatever. But I can't see how either of you would personally go on and challenge all these people with all those comments. Like, I know the feds are proposing some legislation. The European Union is as I'm not sure if they're proposed or they bring in that law to have Twitter and Facebook and a couple of other platforms do it themselves. But I don't know how that works.

Rosemary : [00:41:13] I would just say I had Brett on my show like around that time and he said all this stuff on the show and people loved it on Twitter. People went crazy. They thought he was fantastic. So he may have been getting some hate, but he got hands off from Rosie. Hands off these hours.

Elizabeth: [00:41:29] Oh, man, it's kind of crazy how you could have such different reactions, just like on different shows or in different parts of the Internet. I'm going to take this as a moment to sort of pause and reflect on what you've just said, because I think there's a lot of use to it. I think one of the things that has come out from this discussion is this idea of like, depending on who you are, your identity and your role within a larger organization, you might have very different experiences of negativity and abuse and harassment and and the whole gamut of these different types of negativity. We kind of said at the outset. We also kind of come out of this, I'm noticing conversations about who is responsible for dealing with it and what could come out of it. And so identifying the individual journalist as somebody who doesn't actually have a lot

of power in that system, but is the kind of front face of it and bears the brunt of it, the larger organization, but then also the platforms that these conversations happen on and the the wider kind of legislative context and role of potentially government in dealing with this kind of thing. So building off of what Mark had said, you know, we're expecting online harms legislation to be coming forward.

[00:42:46] We're expecting the federal government to be starting to do something about things like online harassment and hate speech, things like terrorism and child pornography and all of these other harms as as they define in their legislative work. And there's a lot of questions about whether or not that's even possible to come to an agreement on, given the kind of ideological perspectives around when you should or shouldn't be able to engage in those kinds of online. Some call it censorship. From my perspective, everything we post on the Internet is controlled and filtered by these platforms. Like that's literally what they were designed to do. We don't need Facebook or Twitter or Google if we can just filter it all ourselves. So I prefer not to go down the like it's all censorship route, but the basic idea of like somebody's going to control what stays and what goes, what gets prioritized on a screen and what doesn't. And that legislation coming forward I think is really important, but it's also really, really tricky. And journalism is not the only by far not the only area we're going to see that kind of trickiness come up.

Fatima: [00:43:58] Well, it's about enforcement, too, right? Because I've spoken to the police twice because of something that was threatened to me online. And both times it just sort of fizzled away. They were like, "Yeah, we'll look into this for you. We'll try. But here are like 100 limitations to the way we can deal with this. We don't know how to track them. They might not be in the country. They use encrypted software." Like, there's like a million different problems and challenges for the institution to even deal with something like hateful messages or emails or posts and so forth. So it's kind of we're kind of left with this impossible situation, which beyond just putting up as many barriers as we can to protect ourselves so that we can do our work, there's nothing else to do. And then the other problem is if when you put up those barriers, are you actually locking people out from the discourse that you're trying to have? And that's a concern,

too. Like, you know, am I reaching people who maybe don't believe in climate change and or can I talk to them about climate legislation and try and convince them that this is important for their livelihoods and so forth? I don't know.

Elizabeth: [00:45:13] Thank you. Yeah, I. There's a lot of unknowns and there's a lot of tricky things to try and navigate. And I think we're going to be dealing with this for quite some time. Unfortunately, we're coming to time. And so we don't have much more opportunity to dig into this. But what I want to do is end off the episode the same way I end off all Wonks and War Rooms episodes, which is with a quick little pop quiz for you. So it's a short answer. You don't need to go into a lot of detail. Normally my structure is I get you to define the term we started out at the beginning, which would be redefined negativity. But I want to try and end on a slightly lighter note, and what I want you to do is can you offer for the budding journalists listening and watching what what you do to kind of like coach yourself through it, amp yourself up, get yourself excited about actually being a journalist online because there's a lot of stuff that can make it scary and difficult. But you all are working in journalism right now and still doing it and dealing with the online. So what's that little bit of coaching you give yourself?

Mark: [00:46:25] I'm always waiting for the next big story or the next, you know, really cool video or web page that the people I work with who are all awesome are going to produce. I mean, every day is a new day. So that's what absolutely keeps me coming to the table every day.

Elizabeth: [00:46:40] I love it. Thank you. - Fatima.

Fatima: [00:46:43] This is going to sound incredibly idealistic, which is probably totally on brand for me, but it's honestly the feeling that maybe someone will see something that I wrote or said and it will make them pause and think, and that's it. That's all you can ask for.

Elizabeth: [00:47:00] That's pretty great. Thank you.

Rosemary : [00:47:02] My answer is going to suck. Now, I was just going to say, like, as long as my mom got something from it, but that still holds. Listen, these are privileged positions to be able to find news, talk to people and share their stories. And honestly, that's what continues to motivate me, even when dealing with bad experiences. The fact that someone wants to talk to me from a bomb shelter in Ukraine with their baby on their lap, you know, there aren't too many jobs where someone is willing to share with you like that. And that is a great privilege of these jobs.

Elizabeth: [00:47:38] Thank you. All right. That was the live recording from our special event back on March 22nd, looking at journalists facing mean tweets, online harassment, incivility, and what it means for our democracy. I hope you enjoyed it. If you'd like to learn more about this or any of the other episodes we have of Wonks and War Rooms, you can head over to [Polcommtech.ca](https://www.polcommtech.ca). Check the show notes for extra resources. Find our transcripts online, all that good stuff. You know the drill. Our live event was co-hosted with the University of Ottawa's [Center for Law, Technology and Society](#) and was supported in part by [SSHRC Connection Grant](#) and a [SSHRC Partnership Grant](#).