



# RANA AYYUB:

Targeted online violence  
at the intersection of  
misogyny and Islamophobia

## **BIG DATA CASE STUDY**

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**CONTENT WARNING:** This report includes graphic content that illustrates the severity of online violence against women, including references to sexual violence and gendered profanities. This content is not included gratuitously. It is essential to enable the analysis of the types, methods and patterns of attacks against Rana Ayyub.

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**NOTE:** Research underpinning this case study was conducted as part of a [broader project](#) investigating the development of an Online Violence Early Warning System.

**This report is published in partnership with the Story Killers project coordinated by [Forbidden Stories](#). The investigative journalism collaboration involves more than 100 journalists from 30 international media organizations.**



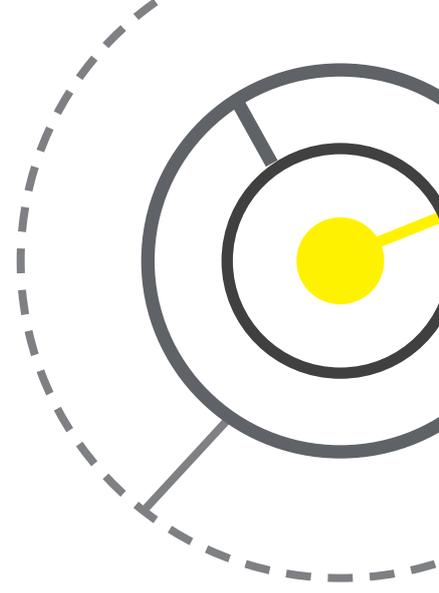
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# 1

# INTRODUCTION

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**“I AM NOT ONLY BEING ATTACKED FOR MY JOURNALISM. I’M BEING ATTACKED FOR MY FAITH. SO IF YOU ARE ATTACKING ME FOR MY FAITH, I DEFEND MYSELF AS A MUSLIM JOURNALIST.”**

Rana Ayyub

## **Woman. Muslim. Investigative journalist. Anti establishment commentator.**

*Washington Post* columnist Rana Ayyub is one of India’s most prominent and globally recognized journalists. She is also an emblematic case of [online violence](#) against women journalists in the region.

The [award-winning](#) independent journalist has faced virtually unrelenting online threats, harassment and abuse for over a decade. She is called “Jihadi Jane”, an “ISIS sex slave”; a “prostitute” and Twitter mobs have called for her to be [gang-raped](#). “The hate started sometime around 2010...when I got Amit Shah<sup>1</sup> arrested..”, she told us, referring to her high impact [undercover investigation](#)<sup>2</sup> into India’s Gujarat Riots, which left nearly 800 Muslims dead and thousands homeless in 2002, and in which India’s current Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his associates were [implicated](#).

Today, an army of trolls evidently aligned with the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) threaten Ayyub at scale; on a daily basis. While she has been badly harassed on Facebook and Instagram, the online violence she experiences is largely facilitated by Twitter, where she has over [1.5 million followers](#). The abuse routinely feature threats of death and rape. They are disinformation-laced, and they display characteristics of orchestration. They are also deeply misogynistic and redolent of religious bigotry. And they radiate to her family members.

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1 Amit Shah is now India’s Home Minister, the second most important man in India, and a close advisor of Prime Minister Modi, then the state of Gujarat’s chief minister.

2 Ayyub’s 2010 investigation into the 2002 Gujarat Riots and subsequent extrajudicial killings in the state was originally published by *Tehelka Magazine* and later self-published as the book *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover-Up*.

Since mid 2021, Ayyub has also been charged with a slew of offenses by Indian authorities, ranging from criminal defamation (connected to an article published in 2009), 'criminal conspiracy' (for sharing a tweet), and fraud (associated with her COVID-19 relief work). International human rights experts have described this pattern as "judicial harassment" in retaliation for her journalism and social media commentary.

There is a [symbiotic relationship](#) between online violence against journalists such as Ayyub and political repression. The former chills press freedom, and creates a more permissive environment for the latter. In India, Prime Minister Modi himself [has been criticized](#) for using his own Twitter account to incite or glorify violence, and maintaining ties with social media accounts involved in the harassment and abuse of journalists and human rights advocates.

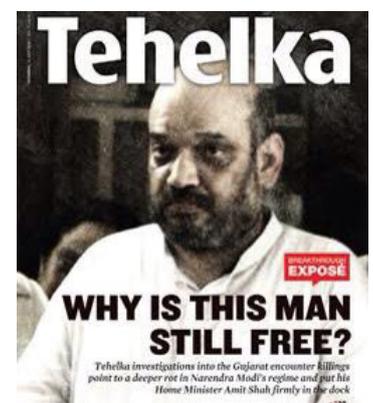
This 'Big Data Case Study'<sup>3</sup> examines the prolific campaign of online violence against Rana Ayyub on Twitter. Adopting a novel mixed method approach applied to an ongoing series of big data case studies involving emblematic targets of gendered online violence, it blends computational linguistics and network analysis of nearly 13 million tweets (collected between December 2019 and March 2022) with qualitative contextual field research, including long form interviews<sup>4</sup> with the research subject, her former editor at the *Washington Post*, and civil society experts. It aims to provide a solid evidence base to assess the online violence against Ayyub, synthesizing her self-reported lived experience with hard data.

## 1.1 The real threat of offline violence

Ayyub has suffered [significant psychological trauma](#) as a result of the online violence she experiences, but there is also a major risk of the online threats and harassment morphing into physical violence in one of the world's [deadliest countries](#) to practice journalism. In fact, the online violence Ayyub endures is so dangerous that United Nations Special Rapporteurs have intervened three times in her case, with five of them issuing a [warning in 2018](#) that her life was at "serious risk" as a result of the targeted harassment and abuse she had experienced.

The first major abuse spike in abuse against Ayyub, according to her experience, followed her undercover investigation into the anti-Muslim 2002 riots in the western Indian state of Gujarat that was then led by the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Ayyub investigated the state government's involvement through undercover reporting, meeting numerous high-level officials (including Modi himself) for her 2010 magazine [cover story](#) about Amit Shah, India's current Home Minister. Soon after, [Shah was arrested](#). Meanwhile, Modi was accused of siding with the perpetrators. In 2023 the [BBC reported](#) that UK officials held Modi "directly responsible," although he continues to reject the allegations.

FIGURE 1: Ayyub's *Tehelka* cover story which contributed to the arrest of BJP politician Amit Shah two weeks after publication in 2010.



<sup>3</sup> The case study was produced as part of a [research project](#) funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) which is working towards development of an Online Violence Early Warning System. The research methods underpinning the study were pioneered by Julie Posetti, Diana Maynard and Kalina Bontcheva for a [2021 research report for ICFJ](#) on the online violence experienced by Maria Ressa as part of a broader [UNESCO-commissioned study](#).

<sup>4</sup> All quotes featured are from original interviews conducted by the researchers unless otherwise indicated.

Murdered Indian journalist [Gauri Lankesh](#) was a friend of Ayyub's who suffered online violence before her assassination and translated Ayyub's incendiary [book](#) on the Gujarat Riots into a regional Indian language just before she was murdered in September, 2017. The [UN Special Rapporteurs](#), press freedom organizations and [researchers](#) have pointed to links between Ayyub's case and the assassinated Indian journalist. The day Lankesh was killed, she had messaged Ayyub to tell her not to worry too much about the online violence she was experiencing.



FIGURE 2: Ayyub posts on Facebook about the murder of her friend Gauri Lankesh, whom she said had told her earlier that day to dismiss the trolls attacking her.

The online violence targeting Ayyub in connection with her investigation into the Gujarat Riots, the extrajudicial killings that followed, and Amit Shah's subsequent arrest was still proliferating as late as 2017. In November that year, in response to a [Facebook post](#) in which she proudly shared a picture of her 2010 cover story, there was a barrage of abuse in reply. Including thinly veiled death threats, like this:

FIGURE 3: A public post on Ayyub's professional Facebook page from 12 November 2017 including a subtle death threat is still visible in 2023.<sup>5</sup>



Ayyub also told us that burned copies of her book on the Gujarat Riots were posted to her in the midst of one of the most serious online attacks against her in 2018.

A [2020 report](#) from the Free Speech Collective of journalists, lawyers and activists found that [200 Indian journalists](#) were physically beaten while 67 were arrested that year. Prominent freelance journalist Neha Dixit said it was "imperative that we start paying attention to violence beyond the online world", after revealing that she and her partner had been [stalked for months](#), threatened with rape, acid attacks and murder, and that she had foiled a break-in attempt at her home.

Ayyub herself links the online violence she experiences to offline threats, including physical stalking. "I know for a fact that there are people who are following me... I've seen them... They are using propaganda websites and social media to also target my family members."

In recognition of the "harassment and misinformation reported against her," Ayyub was named as one of the world's 10 most urgent cases of a journalist under attack by the One Free Press Coalition<sup>6</sup> in [July 2021](#), [December 2021](#) and [March 2022](#).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In line with academic research ethics protocols, we have obscured the identities of social media users featured in this report, unless they are public figures.

<sup>6</sup> The One Press Coalition is a collective of more than 30 media organizations, created during an International Media Council meeting at the World Economic Forum in 2019. The recognition of Ayyub's danger came after police in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh filed a criminal complaint against Ayyub, digital media The Wire, and two other journalists.

<sup>7</sup> Freedom House and the One Free Coalition recognized the abuse spike against Ayyub after she "tweeted her criticism of Saudi Arabia's government role in the ongoing Yemen war, receiving over 26,000 tweets in response, including rape and death threats." See [Ghada Oueiss case study](#) for the similar online abuse she has faced for publishing on Yemen.

## 1.2 The link between gendered online violence and 'lawfare'

The now globally recognizable playbook maneuver of authoritarian States and political figures [weaponizing the law](#) against women journalists alongside targeted online violence campaigns is also practiced in Ayyub's case. For example, there are particular parallels between the methods of attack used against Ayyub and the enabling environment for her legal harassment, and the tactics deployed by the Philippine government against Nobel Peace Prize-winning [Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa](#).<sup>8</sup>

Ayyub was [first charged](#) in June 2021 with 'criminal conspiracy' after sharing a video on Twitter depicting the assault of an elderly Muslim man. Next, in February 2022, she was charged under India's money laundering and tax fraud laws for allegedly keeping money she had fundraised for Indian communities affected by COVID-19. In the aftermath, she was briefly detained and [barred from boarding](#) a flight from Mumbai to the UK to speak at [international events](#) connected to this study. Most recently, in December 2022, Ayyub was formally charged with criminal defamation in connection with a [2009 magazine article](#). She vehemently denies all of these charges.

## 1.3 Intersecting triggers

Ayyub's constant and fierce critique of the ideology, principles, and actions of Hindu nationalism and the BJP - which enjoys an overwhelming majority in India - triggers viral smear campaigns against her. These pile-ons targeting Ayyub are encouraged by [political actors](#) and other public figures,<sup>9</sup> along with [law enforcement](#). She directly attributes the attacks she experiences to the BJP and its supporters, based on the biographies of the Twitter accounts that attack her, which frequently include those self-identifying as Hindu nationalists.

But while the main trigger for the online violence directed at Ayyub may be her critical reporting and commentary, she is targeted at a deeply personal level, at the intersection of multiple points of discrimination, with what she terms her "religious and gender identities". As she points out, smear campaigns are designed to raise questions about the character of the target. "What if she's promiscuous? What if she takes money? What if she cheats? What if she evades taxes? So, there will be some people who will start believing that." But this campaign of undermining Ayyub at a personal level is not just designed to weaken her psychologically and elevate the physical risks she faces, it is also ultimately designed to undercut public trust in her journalism.

Her role as an internationally-published commentator on India's [communal violence](#) and its democratic decline makes Ayyub a particular target. She is a [columnist at the Global Opinions](#) desk at the *Washington Post*, she writes a [popular newsletter](#) on the US-based subscription platform Substack, and she is frequently invited to speak at conferences and fora abroad. As a result, she is accused of being "anti-national" and

<sup>8</sup> Ressa was the subject of the [first Big Data Case Study](#) on a woman journalist facing significant online violence published by ICFJ in partnership with the University of Sheffield in 2021.

<sup>9</sup> "This woman is SEPTIC", BJP politician and popular actor Paresh Rawal [tweeted](#) at Ayyub in 2019 (the politician has [previously targeted](#) writers and journalists). In another example from 2021, Ayyub [tweeted](#) about her father. Subsequent online abuse about him was [escalated](#) by Prem Shukla, a national spokesperson of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP, who [quote tweeted](#) the abuse, condemning it for having "ripped him apart". Ayyub [tweeted](#) that the spokesperson "endorses a fake twitter account that abuses & slanders my father. The twitter account he quotes is allegedly a right wing troll that has used a fake display picture. If this is not harassment by the state, what is?"

of “defaming” India on the world stage. But Ayyub said she looks to “solidarity from the Western media and international pressure” because “this government has unleashed central [law-enforcement] agencies against me and central agencies don’t care about state powers. They can come and arrest me irrespective.”

Twitter is the main vector for the online violence that Ayyub experiences and the platform has utterly failed to protect the journalist where she most frequently shares her reporting and commentary. But while allowing her abusers to proliferate and act with impunity, Twitter has simultaneously [censored tweets](#) from Ayyub at the behest of the Indian government.

## 15 KEY FINDINGS

1. 62% of all obvious abuse directed at Ayyub contained in our Twitter dataset is classed as personal attacks (including sexist, misogynistic, sexually explicit and racist abuse).
2. 24% of all abuse in our dataset is classified as sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit and the most prominent abusive hashtag was the vile portmanteau #presstitutes.
3. Nearly 35% of all abuse studied was identified as credibility-related i.e., reputational attacks designed to undermine Ayyub’s journalism and undercut her commentary.
4. Over 29% of the abuse directed at Ayyub in association with the prevalent abusive term ‘presstitute’ can be categorized as religious bigotry, demonstrating the ways in which the online violence she experiences operates at the intersection of Islamophobia and misogyny.
5. Ayyub regularly receives open rape and death threats, Islamophobic abuse, and character assassination from accounts which do not even bother to conceal the identities of the users behind them, demonstrating the impunity with which they operate.
6. Disinformation - especially gendered disinformation - is a major feature of online attacks on Ayyub - from imposter tweets putting false words into her mouth to deep fake porn videos.

- 7.** Nearly 42% of Ayyub's tweets attracted at least one abusive reply, which represents an exceptionally high rate of abuse.
- 8.** The top three abuse spikes in our dataset reflect large-scale attacks on Ayyub associated with her reporting and commentary in 2020, at the height of the pandemic.
- 9.** Abuse against Ayyub comes at a very high speed, sometimes within seconds of her posting a tweet, and there can be a visible spike in abusive replies within one to two minutes of a post. This pattern is highly unusual and it could signal coordinated campaigns of abuse.
- 10.** Abusive memes and image-based abuse which frequently fly under the radar of detection are a marked feature of the abuse against Ayyub.
- 11.** The online violence against Ayyub is largely instigated and fuelled by Twitter users aligned with Hindu nationalism and India's ruling BJP party.
- 12.** Twitter-based threats and abuse are a feature of the enabling environment for Ayyub's offline legal harassment by the Indian authorities.
- 13.** Lightning rods for attacks include: Ayyub's investigative reporting, her commentary in the international news media, world stage speaking engagements, and international accolades.
- 14.** Twitter is the main vector of online violence against Ayyub and has failed to respond to the abuse. While the platform has allowed her attackers to proliferate virtually unchecked and abuse her with impunity, it recently acceded to a demand from the Indian government to censor Ayyub's tweets.
- 15.** India's highly partisan TV networks, propagandistic blogs, and captured mainstream news outlets amplify and reinforce the gender-based and Islamophobic online abuse that Ayyub experiences.

# Timeline of online violence escalation against Rana Ayyub:

## 2010-2023

The timeline below, mapping the evolution of online violence (including escalation to offline harm) against Rana Ayyub, is followed by a detailed analysis of trends, themes, threats, tropes and networks associated with the abuse, harassment and threats that she experiences on Twitter.

## 2002

The 'Gujarat riots' result in the deaths of about 1,000 people, most of them Muslims, when the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. The militants were aligned with the Hindu nationalist movement, which underpins Modi's BJP.

## 2010

Rana Ayyub, then aged 26, reports an eight-month undercover investigation for investigative English-language magazine *Tehelka*, linking current Indian Home Minister (and close advisor of Modi, then Gujarat's chief minister) Amit Shah to [extrajudicial killings](#), which contributes to his arrest two weeks later. [According](#) to Ayyub, "If the number of tweets generated against me before 2010 were around 50, the numbers had spiraled to a few hundred after".

# 2011

Ayyub opens her current Twitter account.

# 2012

Following another investigative report on Amit Shah's involvement in extra-judicial killings, Ayyub is rumored to be seen with an official from the nation's Central Investigation Agency, in a "salacious" video. The hashtag #ranaayyubcd trends on Twitter, referring to the unproven existence of a sexually compromising CD-Rom purportedly featuring Ayyub. The insinuation was clearly designed to discredit her character and her journalism.

# 2014

- Narendra Modi comes to power, marking the end of Prime Ministerial press conferences in India and the beginning of a period of serious press freedom decline.
- Ayyub becomes an independent freelance journalist.

# March-May 2016

Ayyub accepts help from friends, melts down her own gold - her family's intended dowry for her - to fund and self-publish the full investigation about the 2002 riots, *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover-Up*. According to Ayyub, this represents one of the peaks of the online abuse against her.

# April 2017

- The Hindi edition of *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover-Up* is published.
- In a 2017 [Facebook post](#),<sup>10</sup> a police officer accused an unnamed journalist of 'honey-trapping' police officers, but a news channel picked up on the tweet and named Ayyub as the journalist in question.

10 The [Facebook post by Sanjiv Bhatt reads](#): "The lawyer activist fell easy prey to the charms of the dusky chain smoking journalist and was more than happy to share juicy case details with her... The journalist wanted more... The younger of the two IPS officers was attracted to the journalist and she was attracted to him... little did the two lovers know at that time that the Government Guest Houses where they used to meet for their amorous peccadilloes were discreetly bugged by the operatives of the State Police."

- A 2014 [tweet](#)<sup>11</sup> in which Ayyub quotes and dismisses an abusive tweet about Hindu nationalism directed towards her resurfaces and is misrepresented by trolls. Ayyub is accused of indecent behavior and bombarded with religious slurs and demeaning abuse.

## September 2017

Fellow journalist and Ayyub's friend Gauri Lankesh, who had translated Ayyub's book into regional Indian language Kannada, is [assassinated with impunity](#) after investigating disinformation networks and speaking out about the rise of right-wing Hindu extremism. Ayyub said Lankesh had that morning consoled Ayyub about her online abuse in a Facebook post in which she also downplayed the threat played by online trolls.

## April 2018

- A tweet from a fake account purporting to belong to the news channel Republic TV<sup>12</sup> (founded in 2017 and a favorite of Modi supporters) [claims that Ayyub views punishment against child rapists as a tool to target Muslims](#). The fake tweet is amplified by right-wing influencers, including many government-aligned journalists.
- Two days later, another fake tweet with a manipulated user bio depicts Ayyub allegedly saying that she "[despises India and Indians](#)"; this is amplified by well-known figures.
- A malicious online violence campaign against Ayyub ensues, including threats of murder and attempts to incite her gang rape.
- A deep fake porn video with Ayyub's face morphed onto the head of an actor goes [viral](#); Ayyub is first alerted that it is appearing via RSS and WhatsApp online chat groups maintained by BJP supporters. The video is widely distributed, including on the Facebook page of Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of India's largest state Uttar Pradesh.
- Ayyub files a complaint with law enforcement over the video. She told us: "I gave them at least 200 screenshots and links, and I gave them specifically who they were, on whose fan pages the videos were shared."
- Ayyub is [doxxed](#)<sup>13</sup> in a tweet with a screenshot of the deep fake video; she is subsequently targeted on WhatsApp.
- Burnt copies of Ayyub's book are posted to her home.

11 See Figure 16 for more details.

12 Other media organizations in this ecosystem include online media platform The Scoop Beats - two of whose journalists were convicted of spreading misinformation about Ayyub - far-right-wing news channel Sudarshan News, and right-wing news portal OpIndia.

13 [Doxxing](#) is the process of retrieving, hacking and publishing other people's personally identifiable information such as names, addresses, phone numbers and credit card details in an environment that implies or encourages intimidation or threat.

## May 2018

- A *Washington Post* article [about Ayyub's online abuse](#) again leads to a spike in trolling against her.
- First [intervention](#) by UN special rapporteurs occurs in support of Ayyub, following the mass circulation of disinformation-laced attacks against her, including deep fakes.

## December 2018

Ayyub's [first article](#) as a Global Opinions writer for the *Washington Post* is published.

## May 2019

Narendra Modi is re-elected Prime Minister of India in a landslide victory.

## December 2019

- A new law called the Citizenship Amendment Act is passed by Modi's government, whereby non-Muslims from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have the right to seek fast-tracked citizenship in India. There are protests across the country, some with [fatalities](#).
- A profile on Ayyub is published in [the New Yorker](#), leading to a spike in online violence - a trend seen again following a similar story [published in Time magazine](#) in 2021.

## January 2020

- An Information & Broadcasting Ministry of Pakistan [tweet](#) praising Ayyub for "exposing the fascist agenda of Modi" leads to another online pile-on visible in our Twitter dataset.
- **MAJOR ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET:** [Publication of an Ayyub opinion piece](#) in the *Washington Post* condemning Prime Minister Modi's "divisive agenda to polarize India on religious lines"; amidst debate around the Citizenship Amendment Act, viewed as discriminatory against Muslims.

# February 2020

- 53 people are [killed](#) in north-east Delhi. 21 people, many of them students who had protested the Citizenship Amendment Act for its imposition of a religious test on those seeking citizenship, are charged for alleged conspiracy to defame the Modi government.
- On February 10, [Ayyub responds](#) to a tweet about the controversial Act from the BJP Twitter handle in the state of Karnataka:

FIGURE 4: Ayyub shares a tweet by the BJP Karnataka Twitter handle, which depicts women in hijabs holding up their papers and alleges that Muslim women have said “We won’t show our papers!”<sup>14</sup>

In response, [Ayyub is accused](#) of being a Muslim terrorist, with the @BJP4Karnataka account responding: “Miss Journalist: Issuing threats is a norm in your Jihadi World, not in our Hindutva Bharat!”<sup>15</sup>



# March 2020

- MAJOR ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET:** Ayyub, critical of India’s management of the COVID-19 crisis,<sup>16</sup> [tweets](#) “What is left for a virus to kill in a morally corrupt nation?” As a result, there is a dramatic escalation in attacks against her on the platform.
- Ayyub tweets about a [story on a COVID-19 outbreak](#) in a Muslim congregation which met during lockdown and another abuse spike ensues.

# August 2020

**MAJOR ABUSE SPIKE IN OUR DATASET:** The *Washington Post* publishes an [opinion](#) piece by Ayyub on the rise of Islamophobia and the spreading of anti-Muslim propaganda in Modi’s India.

<sup>14</sup> In February 2020, Ayyub quote tweets: “This is the “official handle of the ruling party of India with a direct threat to Muslims. Does the world need any more proof of Narendra Modi’s agenda to reduce Muslims as second class citizens. So many of us have been accused of misplaced paranoia.”

<sup>15</sup> “Hindutva” is described in a [New York Times profile](#) of slain Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh as a: “fundamentalist, majoritarian movement that seeks to codify and enforce orthodox Hinduism and to define India as an explicitly Hindu country (despite the fact that India has the second-largest Muslim population in the world.” A 2019 [New Yorker](#) profile featuring Ayyub said it is “the idea that India is first and foremost a nation for Hindus”. A 2022 [Atlantic article](#) writes “Hindutva, meaning “Hindu-ness,” has become shorthand for Hindu nationalism itself.”

<sup>16</sup> In May 2022 [the BBC reported](#) that the COVID-19 death toll in India could be “nearly 10 times higher than official records suggest”, according to World Health Organization (WHO) data: “India’s government has rejected the figure, saying the methodology is flawed”.

## May 2021

Charges of tax evasion loom, as tax authorities start an investigation into her affairs. This followed accusations levelled against Ayyub by far right pro-BJP website, [OpIndia](#).

## June 2021

Ayyub [shares](#) a video of an elderly Muslim man who was forced by a mob to chant the Hindu nationalists' rallying cry 'Jai Sri Ram' (Hail Lord Ram). Along with writer Saba Naqvi, Mohammed Zubair, a founder of the Alt news website, The Wire, and Twitter India, she is [charged by the police for criminal conspiracy](#) for [sharing the video](#). The act is condemned by the Press Club of India and Reporters Without Borders, among others. Death and rape [threats follow](#).

## August 2021

Ayyub's bank accounts are frozen as part of the tax evasion investigation until, under protest, she pays US \$270,000 to the tax authorities. She subsequently began legal action to challenge the tax authorities in court.

## October 2021

UN experts<sup>17</sup> intervene for a second time as the online threats against Ayyub escalate again, writing a private letter to the Indian government expressing concern about a "deliberate and sustained campaign of harassment and intimidation". They assert that this campaign appears to be carried out by State and non-State actors in India as a direct response to Ayyub "exercising her right to freedom of opinion and expression online".

## November 2021

- Ayyub appears in a BBC interview for the programme [HARDTalk](#), where she describes the Muslim man as having been force-shaven and forced to chant a Hindu slogan "by a mob of Hindu vigilantes".

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<sup>17</sup> Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues.

# December 2021

Rana Ayyub tweets: "A week into my BBC Hard Talk interview and a summon by a central investigating agency. How very predictable :)"

# January 2022



Ayyub criticizes the Saudi government's role in Yemen in a tweet. Her name trends on Twitter - 26,000 mentions of her name are recorded by Twitter, with multiple death and rape threats among the abuse she experiences. She identifies right-wing Indian accounts and those with Saudi-identifying profiles as prime offenders. A doctored video purporting to establish that Ayyub is aided by Pakistan and banned from Saudi Arabia goes viral, exacerbating the pile-on.<sup>18</sup>

FIGURE 5: A *tweet* posted by Rana Ayyub on 24 January, 2022, highlighting her name trending on Twitter and asserting that most of the mentions were abusive and rape and death threats.

# February 2022

- On 4 February 2022, India's central government agency Enforcement Directorate (ED) charges Ayyub for alleged fraud in connection with her COVID-19 relief work and associated community fundraising activities under sub-section (1) of section 5 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (15 of 2003), (PMLA), freezing her bank accounts. Many, including UN experts and her US-based employer, link the charges to her critical reporting and commentary. On social media, she is labeled a "thief" and a "fraud" as attacks increase, further sully her reputation. Ayyub's bank accounts are frozen for the second time in six months.
- During the same period, a fake tweet purporting to come from Israel Defence Forces claiming Israel rejected Ayyub's (non-existent) application for citizenship was shared on [Twitter](#). This followed Ayyub tweeting in support of Palestine, following the US condemnation of the attack on Ukraine by Russia. Accounts belonging to right-wing Indians are seen commending Israel for it.
- On 10 February, Mumbai police [arrest](#) a man in connection with death threats sent to Ayyub via social media, following charges brought

18 A closer analysis of a subset of this abuse is discussed below.

against six social media users in connection with death threats, sexual harassment, and identify theft. That same day, Ayyub [tweets](#):

*"Mumbai cyber crime has made the first arrest in the rape and death threats issued to me. A young man has been arrested from Bhopal for giving me death threats. Hugely impressed with the alacrity of @MumbaiPolice and @CPMumbaiPolice who had promised me justice without delay".*

- In a [BBC World News interview](#), Ayyub comments on the Indian hijab protests involving a Hindu mob surrounding a Muslim girl wearing a hijab in a college in Karnataka. She describes the boys as "Hindu vigilantes, Hindu terrorists for that matter".
- The Hindu IT Cell, a far right BJP-aligned group [filed a legal complaint](#) against Ayyub in reference to her appearance on the [BBC World News interview](#) for: "labeling innocent Hindu students as terrorists... The number of complaints will increase and we will teach her a lesson through legal means". Pictures of Ayyub in skirts and short dresses are shared online to condemn her alleged "hypocrisy" over her position on the hijab.

## March 2022

- On 5 March 2022, Ayyub [tweets](#) that two 'journalists', Vidyanshi Krishkumar Trivedi and Ayush Chandramohan Srivastav from online site The Scoop Beats, [are arrested](#) by Mumbai police for spreading disinformation about Ayyub: "[they] had accused me of being aided by Pakistan, announced that I had been banned by Saudi Arabia, and attributed morphed anti-India tweets to me".
- On 29 March 2022, Ayyub is held by immigration officials at Mumbai airport en route to London to speak at an event organized by the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), Doughty Street Chambers and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).<sup>19</sup>
- A full-page advertisement is taken out in the *Washington Post* in partnership with the [Coalition Against Online Violence](#), in support of Ayyub:

*"Almost every day Rana Ayyub faces threats of violence and death. She has been the target of prejudiced investigations and online harassment. Her bank account was frozen over charitable work. Journalists should not fear prosecution and smear campaigns".*

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<sup>19</sup> The organization commissioned to undertake this research

# April 2022

- Ayyub successfully appeals to the High Court to secure her right to travel to Italy to deliver a [keynote address](#)<sup>20</sup> at the International Journalism Festival and on to the US to accept an industry award. She is viciously trolled again after her speech in Italy, with [disinformation agents](#) masquerading as news publishers fuelling the blowback.
- Ayyub is awarded the Overseas Press Club of America Award for 'best commentary in any medium on international news.' The judges [said](#):

*At grave personal risk, Rana Ayyub of the Washington Post has called out Prime Minister Narendra Modi's systemic persecution of the Muslim minority. As one juror noted, "Her stories are truly frightening, and India's slide into religious nationalism does not get nearly enough attention".*

# September 2022

- Ayyub joins the University of Chicago Institute of Politics as a [2022 Pritzker fellow](#) for three months.
- Ayyub receives a Mumbai court summons for an article<sup>21</sup> that she [wrote in 2009](#) about a hardline [right-wing Hindu organization](#) linked with a terror attack in Goa. She [explains](#) that the allegation against her cites her bias as a Muslim.

# December 2022

- Ayyub is awarded the [2022 International John Aubuchon Press Freedom award](#) from the US National Press Club, previously won by a slew of prominent press freedom defenders. In a talk with fellow *Washington Post* writer Jason Rezaian, she said: "When I won the Aubuchon award, I had comments on my Instagram and Twitter asking how it felt 'selling your country'."
- On 22 December, 2022 US Senator Patrick Leahy publishes a [statement](#) in support of Rana Ayyub and freedom of the press, [tweeting](#): "Rana Ayyub and other brave journalists who risk their lives to report on abuses of power and other matters of public interest need our protection and support"

20 This keynote address and interview were moderated by Julie Posetti, lead author of this case study.

21 The 2009 article in question is no longer available on the Tehelka webpage, but Ayyub has [republished](#) it via her newsletter.

- While in the US, Ayyub is alerted to a charge sheet having been issued for criminal defamation in reference to the above-mentioned article published in 2009.

## January 2023

- Ayyub returns to India for hearings in [two separate courts](#) pertaining to the money laundering charges.
- Ayyub's lawyer Vrinda Grover makes a [connection](#) between the legal harassment and online violence in court, reading out certain tweets of Hindu IT Cell members who thank the ED for registering the complaint against Ayyub; one reads 'send Rana Ayyub to Ghaziabad jail, suffice for us!'

# 2

# METHODOLOGY

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## Twitter is the main vector for online violence against Ayyub.

She has significant traction on the platform, and her abusers target her where she has most impact with digital audiences. Therefore, to determine the features, patterns and trajectories of online violence towards Ayyub, we have studied a very large Twitter dataset of nearly 13 million (12,979,519) tweets collected between 12 December 2019 and 1 March 2022.<sup>22</sup> Adopting a novel mixed method approach applied to an ongoing series of big data case studies involving emblematic targets of gendered online violence, we have triangulated this data with contextual qualitative research, including in-depth interviews with Ayyub, her editor and civil society experts.

On the quantitative side, we applied Natural Language Processing (NLP) and network analysis techniques to the dataset. After excluding tweets authored by Ayyub and automatic retweets of her tweets by others, we more closely examined 8.7 million (12,979,519) tweets directed at Ayyub during the period. Of those, 647,619 are original tweets authored by other users; over 3.5 million (3,629,516) are replies to Ayyub posted by these accounts; and just over 4 million (4,473,511) are retweets relating to tweets by the other users.

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<sup>22</sup> We began collecting Twitter data focused on Rana Ayyub in the context of a global study against online violence against women journalists commissioned by UNESCO in November 2019. The comprehensive [final study](#) from this project was published in 2022.

**12,979,519  
TWEETS  
WERE ANALYZED**

**COLLECTED BETWEEN  
12 DECEMBER 2019 AND 1 MARCH 2022**

More than 75% of the tweets collected are in English,<sup>23</sup> 13% in Hindi, and the remainder in other languages. Among these are tweets in 'Hinglish', which blends English and Hindi vocabulary or constructions, but Twitter doesn't tag these as a separate language category. The reach of Ayyub's own tweets is very high, attracting just over 4 million (4,212,605) retweets by some of her 1.5 million followers.

The NLP tools deployed to examine the dataset include an English rule-based abuse classifier developed to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive tweets, the target of the abuse (whether it was aimed at the journalist in question or someone else), and various characteristics of the abuse (e.g. whether the abuse was political, racist, sexist, sexually explicit, etc.). Abusive terms are only matched in the text when they occur in a linguistically relevant way (for example, not every instance of the word "die" is abusive, but "You deserve to die" certainly is).

The NLP analysis is based on a 'high accuracy detection' model, and consequently the samples of online abuse extracted using this method are considered to be severely under-reported, capturing only around 50% of all English-language abusive messages present in the target's social media stream, according to [previous studies](#).<sup>24</sup>

So, it is important to note that a great deal of abuse therefore flies under the radar of this kind of automated detection, especially that represented in images, memes, and GIFs, and/or requiring the context of additional information such as links and conversation threads. This is why our approach of synthesizing big data analysis with parallel qualitative analysis of original interviews and contextual research undertaken in India is so necessary.

Next, we conducted network analysis on the prevalent abusive accounts to determine interconnections and the distribution pattern of the abuse.

We conducted the qualitative field research in parallel with the quantitative research and subsequently undertook a thematic analysis of the interview data before synthesizing the qualitative and quantitative datasets. Once this data synthesis and analysis was completed, we were able to produce the timeline of systematic online violence against Ayyub featured above, highlighting key escalation points.

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23 According to Twitter's language classification.

24 See also: G. Gorrell, M. Greenwood, I. Roberts, D. Maynard, K. Bontcheva. Twits, Twats and Twaddle: Trends in Online Abuse towards UK Politicians. In Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2018), 25-28 June 2018, Stanford, US.

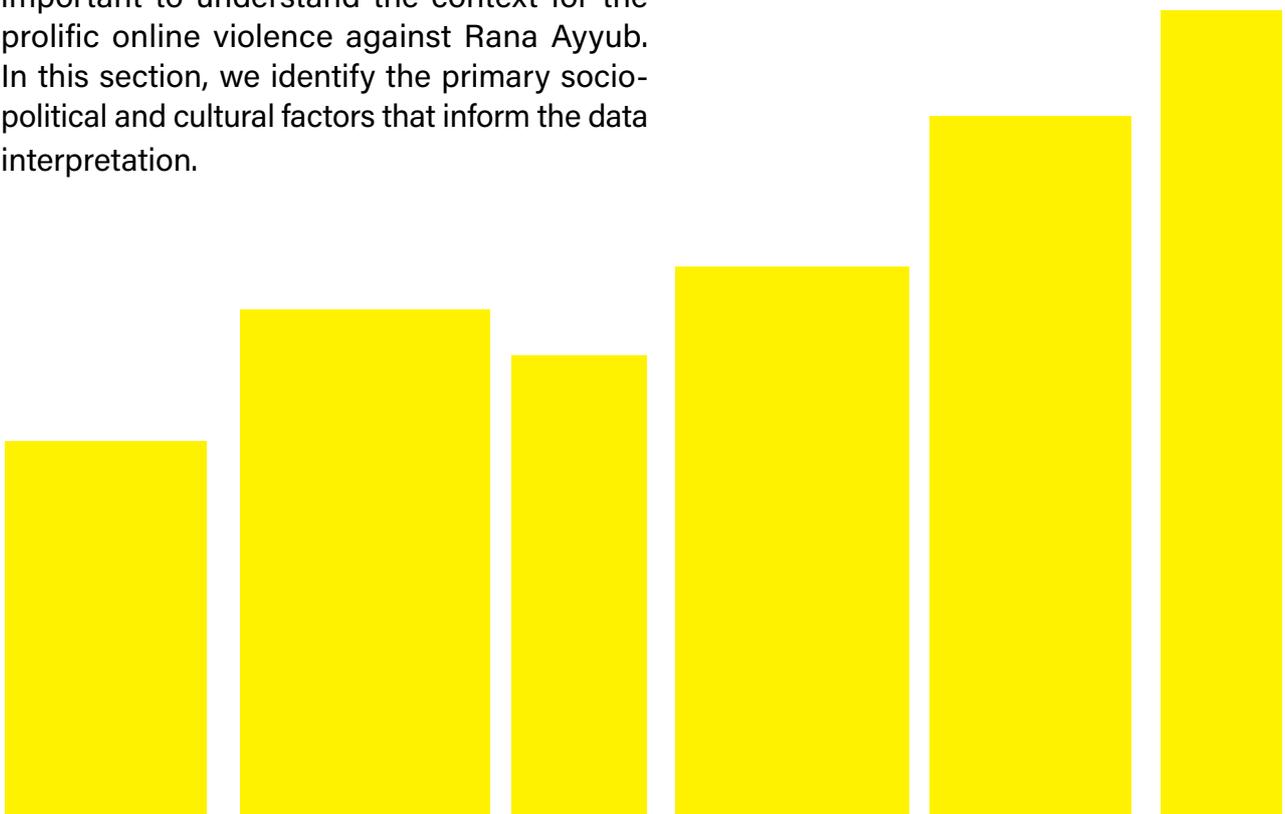
# 3

## THE CONTEXT:

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### Online violence as a tool of repression in a backsliding democracy

Before analyzing our Twitter dataset, it is important to understand the context for the prolific online violence against Rana Ayyub. In this section, we identify the primary socio-political and cultural factors that inform the data interpretation.



## 3.1 Severe press freedom erosion in Modi's India

Narendra Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist administration attempts to stifle independent journalism in India through censorship, shutdowns, imprisonment of critical journalists, and other restrictive measures, including spyware and surveillance. India was ranked 150th out of 180 countries on [Reporters Without Borders' \(RSF\) 2022 World Press Freedom Index](#), despite simultaneously being regarded as the world's largest democracy. It has slipped eight places on the ladder since 2021.

RSF has blamed the hostile environment created by the government for the increased online violence campaigns against journalists, and [described](#) India as one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists: "The coordinated hate campaigns waged on social networks against journalists who dare to speak or write about subjects that annoy Hindutva followers are terrifying and include calls for the journalists concerned to be murdered".

Similarly, the US NGO Freedom House [rated India](#) only 'partly free' on the Global Freedom Score<sup>25</sup> in 2021, with the freedom and independence of the news media scoring only two out of four. Freedom House observed that attacks on press freedom have "escalated dramatically under the Modi government" and further noted that: "Authorities have used security, defamation, sedition, and hate speech laws, as well as contempt-of-court charges, to quiet critical voices in the media. Hindu nationalist campaigns aimed at discouraging forms of expression deemed 'anti-national' have exacerbated self-censorship".

### A deadly place to practice journalism

Practicing journalism can be deadly in India. The country is [ranked third](#) after Mexico and Afghanistan in 2021 according to UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists, which counts [35 journalists](#) killed in India since the ruling BJP came to power in 2014. Five journalists were killed in the country in 2021, and journalists who report critically on Modi and his administration - as Ayyub frequently does - are often targeted for retribution, just as [Gauri Lankesh](#) was. In fact, the UN Special Rapporteurs intervening in Ayyub's case in 2018 pointed to Lankesh's murder as a signal of the risks posed to Ayyub's life as a result of the online violence she experiences.

Compounding these risks is India's serious [problem of impunity](#) for crimes against journalists. For example, the Indian government has not provided a single response to the UNESCO Director General's request for information on a judicial follow-up in any of the killings of journalists recorded.

25 Since 1972, US research institute Freedom House has produced a Freedom in the World Report annually that ranks countries based on their levels of democratic freedom, political rights and civil liberties.

## 3.2 Media capture: Nationalistic news outlets as attack dogs

Online violence directed at critics of the Indian government and the country's ruling party, Rana Ayyub prominent among them, not only further imperils the safety of journalists in India, it has had a significant chilling effect on critical reporting in the country.

As RSF [noted](#) in 2022, Indian news media have faced increasing pressure to toe the government line since the overwhelming victory of Narendra Modi's BJP in 2019. As a result: "The pro-government media pump out a form of propaganda, journalists who dare to criticize the government are branded as 'anti-state', 'anti-national', or even 'pro-terrorist' by supporters of the ruling [BJP]".

In addition to intimidation tactics, financial pressure has been deployed by the Indian government to capture most of India's mainstream media houses. This includes the [withholding of government advertising](#) from critical media outlets, according to a report from the Stimson think tank:

*Many media outlets enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the government, in turn receiving attention, funding, and prominence. These trends damage India's democracy and also put journalists critical of the government in danger, threatening their right to physical safety.*

Indeed, the national mainstream Indian media is increasingly 'nationalist', and it tends to adopt the State position on religious minorities and [amplify hate speech](#) in campaigns against critics of the government, such as Ayyub. Along with propagandistic websites, they parrot and inflame the attacks on Ayyub, which frequently target her at the intersection of misogyny and Islamophobia.<sup>26</sup>

Sections of niche and independent Indian media houses and international news organizations have continued to report critically on the government and attacks on minorities, even in the face of enormous pressure.<sup>27</sup> As a result, they are regularly targeted and threatened by both the government and its large base of supporters online. The government has cracked down on numerous Indian journalists by detaining, arresting, and [intimidating them](#), while also pursuing independent news publishers through the courts.

## 3.3 Mob violence and persecution of minorities

Discrimination and prejudice against minorities, particularly Muslims, has been normalized in India since Modi came to power in 2014. The country has also seen open calls for genocide and mass murder fuelled by disinformation and hate speech circulating on social media. Such online targeting of minorities has been linked to

<sup>26</sup> Among [answers on a Quora page](#) (a US-based question-and-answer website) titled "Who is Rana Ayyub, and why does she keep abusing India and Indians?"; one targets Ayyub for her childhood disability and religion: "Just a crippled Jihadi keyboard warrior ranting against Hindus and Modi for her polio and sex-deprived life."

<sup>27</sup> For example, following the [revocation of Kashmir's special status](#) in August 2019, most of the national media did not report critically on the large-scale crackdown, whereas the international news outlets with [foreign correspondents](#) on the ground in the region did hold the government up to [scrutiny](#).

several instances of mob lynching. For instance, in 2018 at least 19 people were killed within two months in India, over a fake news story about child abductors that went viral over WhatsApp.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)<sup>28</sup> reported in 2021 that:

*Government officials and nonstate actors continued to use social media and other forms of communication to harass and spread hatred and disinformation against minority communities, including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits.*

A prominent aspect of this intolerance has been attacks on critics by the ruling party and their supporters. Those speaking out against the policies or ideology of the BJP come under heavy attack. Rana Ayyub - a Muslim journalist whose reporting and commentary focus on the persecution of religious minorities - is naturally a prime target. This fact is underscored by the fact that the three biggest spikes in our data were triggered by posts in 2020 in which Ayyub discusses the implications of government policies for religious minorities (see discussion in Section 5).

## 3.4 International reporting, xenophobia and the 'defaming' of India

International news media continue to report critically on India from within the country and offshore. This has led to international media houses being characterized and viewed as 'anti-India', while Rana Ayyub is accused of "defaming India" before a global audience in response to her critique and commentary on the Hindu nationalist government. Ayyub's work as a columnist for the *Washington Post* therefore makes her a bigger target for the Modi government and its supporters. "For them, it's like 'She's just getting a lot of international fame,'" she told us.

And while perpetrators of online violence against Ayyub are frequently identifiable as adherents of Hindu nationalism, she told us that her detractors also include 'liberal' commentators who deem her anti-establishment stance to be 'anti-national' or 'harmful' for India's global reputation, for example when the UN has intervened on her behalf:

*The so-called 'secular liberal' diplomats said, why did Rana have to take this on the international level to spite India? And I'm like, hang on, I'm being humiliated day in, day out. And if somebody else intervenes for my safety, you are saying that I am trying to spite India on an international level. So they made it about me trying to be unpatriotic about getting the UN into our affairs.*

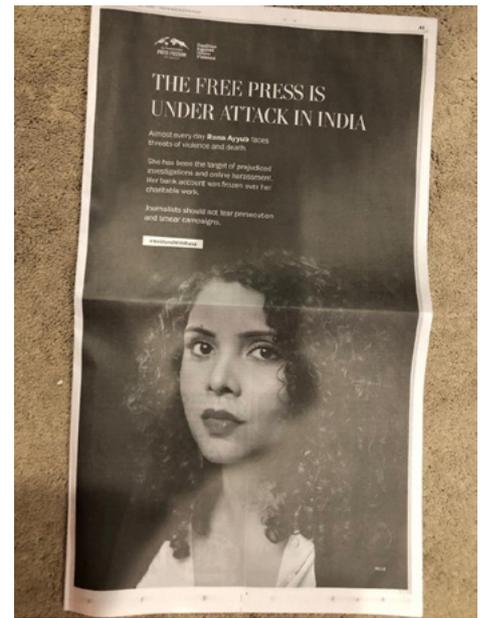
But Ayyub also highlighted how vital it was to her journalistic mission to draw international attention to the escalating violence against religious minorities in India. Engagement

<sup>28</sup> The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is a US federal government agency that monitors the right to freedom of religion across the world and provides policy recommendations to the US President and Congress.

and solidarity with the international news media<sup>29</sup> offers her a protective shield as online attacks increase in parallel with legal harassment. It serves as a caution to those seeking to restrict her reporting and movement, helping to keep her safe, she said, pointing to a full page advertisement in the *Washington Post*<sup>30</sup> published as an act of support:

*That's kept me alive... they had made up their mind to jail me. I am alive today and I'm able to do my journalism only because of the intervention of international journalists. They would have just silenced me because they knew the Indian media had already thrown me under the bus.*

FIGURE 6: A full-page print advert in the *Washington Post*, February 2022, highlighting that their columnist Rana Ayyub faces daily threats of violence and death, and is a target of "prejudiced investigations" and online violence. It was published in collaboration with the *Coalition for Online Violence*.<sup>31</sup> Credit: Rana Ayyub.



## 3.5 The authoritarian playbook

There is a gendered online violence playbook being followed by authoritarian regimes which target women journalists as they curb press freedom as a means of suppressing opposition and consolidating power. The characteristics of the attacks on Ayyub are very similar to those deployed against other women journalists whose cases we've studied in detail, including Nobel laureate [Maria Ressa](#) and [Al Jazeera's Ghada Oueiss](#). They are also very familiar to [Elias Lopez](#) who was, until recently, Senior Editor of Global Opinions at the *Washington Post*, and Ayyub's supervisor:<sup>32</sup>

*... campaigns of personal discrediting like we're seeing with Rana, trying to discredit the person challenging the government or institutions, or taking on powerful interests... it is something that unfortunately is happening in many, many different countries, but also, of course, with their own very unique local characteristics.*

Lopez said the *Washington Post* "needs to extend as much institutional support" as possible to Ayyub and other freelance journalists on the newspaper's roster working around the globe in difficult conditions. "Those writers are part of the *Washington*

<sup>29</sup> *The Times* of London, the *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *the Guardian* and the *Washington Post* have, on numerous occasions, reported about the attacks, intimidation, and harassment Ayyub has faced.

<sup>30</sup> See Figure 6; this advert was put out in Ayyub's defense, accompanied by the hashtag #WeStandWithRana to galvanize international advocacy.

<sup>31</sup> A group of 12 international civil society organizations signed the [letter](#), including: ARTICLE 19, Coalition For Women in Journalism, Committee to Protect Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, International Center for Journalists (ICJ), International Press Institute (IPI), International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), OnlineSOS, PEN America, Reporters Without Borders, Rural Digital Youth Resiliency Project, Women's Media Center (WMC).

<sup>32</sup> Lopez left this position in January 2023, and is now senior editor at CBS News.

*Post*. They have our institutional support, and their work meets the absolute standards of everything we do in the *Washington Post*," he said. This is all the more important because one of Lopez' former contributors - Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi - was [assassinated with impunity](#) after sustained online threats.

## 3.6 The function of 'lawfare' in Ayyub's persecution

Rana Ayyub is facing [multiple investigations and charges](#) in a context of increasing legal harassment of critical journalists in India. This 'lawfare' is layered with disinformation-fuelled online attacks designed to reinforce the view that she is a 'criminal', or a 'corrupt' journalist, diminish her support base, and legitimize her prosecution.

When Ayyub criticized the Modi government for its "inept" handling of the second wave of COVID-19, she was brutally trolled and sent rape threats. She told us that these threats reminded her of those received by Gauri Lankesh before she was murdered. Disinformation metanarratives began to be seeded in conjunction with these attacks, along with suggestions that Ayyub misappropriated pandemic relief funds that she raised through the Indian crowd-funding platform Ketto.

In May 2021, Ayyub [faced an investigation](#) by the tax authorities after right-wing pro-BJP website OpIndia published alleged irregularities connected to her COVID-19 fundraising. Ayyub, Twitter Inc, Twitter Communications India and other journalists and news outlets<sup>33</sup> were [charged](#) by police for inciting 'communal unrest', for reportedly sharing and facilitating distribution of a video of an elderly Muslim rickshaw-driver being heckled by young men and made to chant a Hindu nationalist slogan, 'Jai Shri Ram' (Hail Lord Ram). Ayyub and the others accused were charged under Indian Penal Code sections 153 (wantonly giving provocation with intent to cause riot), 153A (promoting enmity between groups on ground of religion, class etc.), 295A (Deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious belief) and 120B (criminal conspiracy). A Bombay Court later provided [anticipatory bail](#) to Ayyub in connection with the charge which carries a potential jail term of five years.

By September 2021, Ayyub was [being investigated](#) by the Central Investigations Agency (India's main police investigations agency) for alleged corruption and fraud connected to her fundraising for communities badly affected by COVID-19 in three campaigns in 2020 and 2021.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Ayyub was bombarded on Twitter with hashtags like #ranaayyubchorhai in Hindi (#RanaAyyubIsThief).<sup>35</sup> At this time, a hoax tweet saying her passport had been [rejected](#) by Israel also went viral.

The targeted tax and foreign investment-related cases against Ayyub meant that for months in 2021 and 2022 she was unable to access her bank accounts, resulting in financial hardship. [Charges connected to the cases include](#) criminal breach of trust, cheating, and dishonestly inducing delivery of property, with one charge alone attracting a prison sentence of up to seven years.

33 Journalist Mohammed Zubair, Congress leaders Dr Sama Mohammad, Salman Nizami, Masqoor Usmani and writer Saba Naqvi.

34 In a First Information Report (FIR) by the Ghaziabad police, the complainant accused Ayyub of illegally acquiring public money.

35 There are 9,257 tweets in our dataset containing this hashtag.

In February 2022, the far-right Hindu IT Cell group - whose activities have been amplified by BJP leaders - filed a police complaint of 'hurting religious sentiments'<sup>36</sup> against Ayyub. The complaint pertained to an [interview she gave to BBC World News](#), in which she described a mob who attacked a hijab-wearing student in the state of Karnataka as "Hindu terrorists". The Cell tweeted that it had filed a legal complaint against Ayyub in reference to her BBC appearance for "labeling innocent Hindu students as terrorist... The number of complaints will increase and we will teach her a lesson through legal means".

At this time, pictures of Ayyub in skirts and short dresses were shared to condemn her alleged "hypocrisy" over her position on the hijab, with a clear purpose, she says:

*To make sure that the cops register a complaint against me, they started trending me. They started trending and everybody started tagging the cops like, 'OK, we have filed a complaint, what are you doing? What are you doing about this woman? She's a hater monger.' So that's a pressure tactic that they use.*

The Hindu IT Cell was founded by [Vikas Pandey](#) and [Ramesh Solanki](#), both of whom are openly Hindu ultranationalists and supporters of Narendra Modi. It operates a [Twitter account](#) by the same name which has been blatant in its attacks on government critics, including Ayyub. A registered trust in India, the Cell uses its Twitter account to openly [target](#) politicians, journalists, and social activists who criticize Hindu nationalism and the BJP.

On 4 March, 2022, it was reported that the police in Karnataka had [brought a case](#) against Ayyub in connection with the Hindu IT Cell complaint regarding Ayyub's BBC interview. The offense is punishable by up to three years in jail.

Later in March, Ayyub was [prevented](#) from taking a flight<sup>37</sup> to London at the Mumbai Airport by the Enforcement Directorate (ED)<sup>38</sup> for her alleged role in the above-mentioned money laundering case. The ED, which is a central government agency responsible for handling economic offenses, had earlier summoned Ayyub for questioning. Despite the events which she was going to attend being public knowledge, Ayyub was [restrained from traveling](#) at the last moment as she tried to cross the border.<sup>39</sup> She was en route to London to speak on a [high level panel](#) at an event co-sponsored by the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), Doughty Street Chambers and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).

[UN experts](#) called for an end to the "judicial harassment" of Ayyub and referred to the allegations as "bogus", saying that they could be traced back to a far right social media entity. [Dozens of international civil society organizations](#) also interpreted this conduct as State persecution in retaliation for Ayyub's critical reporting and commentary.

In September 2022, while undertaking a fellowship at the University of Chicago, Ayyub received a summons from a Mumbai court for an article that she [wrote in 2009](#) about

36 This is quite a sweeping, broad charge which can be brought under different sections of the Indian Penal Code by individuals. For example, in early 2021 a young comedian was [charged](#) for videos he had made on social media, alleged jokes about Hindus. He was charged under sections 153A ("promoting enmity between different groups on ground of religion") and 295A ("deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion") and Sections 65 and 66 of the Information Technology Act, 2008.

37 Seven months after Ayyub was stopped at the airport, Kashmiri photojournalist Sanna Irshad Mattoo was similarly [not allowed to leave India](#) in October 2022 - in her case, to receive a Pulitzer Prize.

38 ED is a "[financial fraud investigative body housed in the ministry of finance](#)".

39 Ayyub was on her way to London to speak about online violence against women journalists in India, followed by an address at the Perugia International Journalism Festival in Italy on Indian democracy. She was also supposed to receive an award, and address *The Guardian* newsroom.

a hardline [Hindu organization](#) linked with a terror attack in Goa.<sup>40</sup> She [tweeted](#) that the allegation against her cites her bias as a Muslim. Ayyub said she was alerted to a charge sheet having been issued against her for criminal defamation in December the same year - an offense which attracts a jail sentence of up to two years.

All cases and charges against Ayyub were ongoing at the time of writing in February 2023.

## Some progress: Arrests of Ayyub's online attackers

India lacks constructive and comprehensive implementation of laws against online violence and hate. However, in February 2022, Mumbai Police made the first online abuse-related [arrest](#) of a man who used Instagram to threaten to rape and kill Ayyub if she continued her work as a journalist. Ayyub [tweeted](#) that she was "[hugely impressed](#)" with Mumbai Police's "alacrity".<sup>41</sup>

The following month, two journalists from the website The Scoop Beats were [arrested](#) for accusing Ayyub - on YouTube - of being "aided by Pakistan...banned by Saudi Arabia, and [attributing] morphed anti-India tweets to me". Ayyub [tweeted](#) that these were "spreading the most vicious fake news" against her, "at the behest of" their employers. "This is a big step in the direction of justice," she said. She also said she was grateful that "the Mumbai Cyber Crime and its efficient team at BKC<sup>42</sup> [*Bandra-Kurla Complex Cyber Police Station - ed*] had earlier arrested two others in the case for sending me and my family members explicit death and rape threats".

## 3.7 United Nations interventions

The prolific harassment and threats targeting Ayyub have attracted UN experts' attention and intervention since 2018. That year, following the mass circulation of gendered and disinformation-laced attacks designed to shame Ayyub, heightening the risks she faced offline and countering her critical writing, four UN experts [called on](#) the Indian government to act to protect Ayyub, stating: "We are highly concerned that the life of Rana Ayyub is at serious risk following these graphic and disturbing threats." They [warned](#) of similarities between the attacks on Ayyub and online violence experienced by her colleague and friend Gauri Lankesh prior to the journalist's assassination in 2017.

In October 2021, when the threats against Ayyub escalated once more, the UN experts intervened again, writing a private [letter](#) to the Indian government expressing concerns about "what appears to be a deliberate and sustained campaign of harassment and intimidation of Ms. Rana Ayyub". They asserted that this campaign appeared to be carried out by State and non-state actors in India as a direct response to Ayyub "exercising her right to freedom of opinion and expression online". When the Indian government failed to respond to this letter by the deadline set, the UN experts published their letter.

UN Special Rapporteurs publicly intervened again for Ayyub in February 2022, referring to what they [termed](#) "judicial harassment" for her independent reporting. This appeal [mentioned](#) that the "lack of condemnation and proper investigation by the Government,

<sup>40</sup> The 2009 article in question is no longer available on the Tehelka webpage, but Ayyub has [republished](#) it via her newsletter.

<sup>41</sup> Ayyub's [tweet](#) from 31 January 2022: "Mumbai Police has registered an FIR against those who disseminated fake news, morphed tweets and death and rape threats against me. About time these brazen and consolidated acts of online violence are stopped and the perpetrators brought to book."

<sup>42</sup> A [Mumbai police page](#) describes this as a "branch dealing with the investigation of website hacking, cyber stalking, cyber pornography, e-mail, credit card crime, software piracy, on-line fraud and internet crime."

coupled with the legal harassment it has itself inflicted on Ms. Ayyub, has only served to falsely legitimize the attacks and attackers and further endangered her safety". They also called on the Indian State to take action to protect Ms. Ayyub:

*Relentless misogynistic and sectarian attacks online against journalist Rana Ayyub must be promptly and thoroughly investigated by the Indian authorities and the judicial harassment against her brought to an end at once... In response to Ms. Ayyub's efforts to shine a light on public interest issues and hold power to account through her reporting, she has been maliciously targeted with anonymous death and rape threats by organised groups online.*

The UN experts have pointed out that the attacks are a result of Ayyub's reporting on issues affecting minority Muslim communities<sup>43</sup> in India, including the banning of hijabs in schools and colleges in Karnataka, along with her critique of the Narendra Modi government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. "The Government is not only failing in its obligation to protect Ms. Ayyub as a journalist, but through its own investigations of Ms. Ayyub, it is also contributing to and exacerbating her perilous situation," the 2022 statement further reads.

FIGURE 7: A tweet from UN Geneva on Twitter, emphasizing that the Indian authorities needed to "thoroughly investigate" the "relentless misogynistic and sectarian attacks online" against Ayyub, and "end" the "judicial harassment".



Any criticism of State-linked attacks on Ayyub from international organizations is also viewed as an act of interference with Indian sovereignty: the Indian government called the allegations baseless, and asked the UN experts to be 'objective' in their assessment. Captured news media characteristically shrieked about the UN Special Rapporteurs' 2022 intervention, compounding the near instantaneous online hate directed at Ayyub, the UN, and those expressing solidarity.

FIGURE 8: A meme featuring Bollywood actors from a popular film mocking the UN Special Rapporteurs' intervention in Ayyub's case ("UN saving Rana Ayyub") whilst a war in Ukraine is going on ("Ukraine expecting UN to save"). This image-based abuse was posted in reply to a February 2022 tweet from the UN Human Rights Council on Twitter.



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43 India has a population of approximately 200 million Muslims, about 14% of the population.

# 4

## DETAILED ANALYSIS OF OUR TWITTER DATASET

After using Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools to examine the 8.7 million tweets directed at Rana Ayyub in our dataset, we identified a subset of nearly 45 thousand (44,467) 'clearly abusive' tweets targeting Ayyub in English and 'Hinglish' and isolated that data for detailed analysis. As discussed in Section 2, we estimate that this automated process misses at least 50% of the abuse leveled at Ayyub in the dataset because the tools, tuned for high accuracy, mainly identify those messages which are explicitly abusive and where the target of the abuse is clear.<sup>44</sup> Additional limitations apply to analysis in Hindi language tweets.

<sup>44</sup> See detailed methodology discussion in Section 2.

## 4.1 High speed and acutely targeted abuse

63% (27,788) of the clearly abusive tweets targeting Ayyub were replies to her tweets; 878 were original abusive tweets mentioning Ayyub; 6,485 are abusive replies to other tweets; and 9,318 (20.9%) are retweets of some of the abusive tweets. The large number of retweets that the abusive tweets attracted highlights the significant amplification of abuse towards Ayyub, which thus dramatically increases the negative effects of the online violence she experiences, and heightens the associated offline safety threats.

To put these figures in context, of the 8,232 tweets posted by Ayyub which received at least one reply, 3,390 (41.1% of the 8,232 tweets) of them attracted at least one abusive reply.<sup>45</sup> This percentage of 41.1% is exceptionally high, underscoring the scale and frequency of attacks on Ayyub mounted in response to her tweets.

The speed with which the abuse flies in is also highly unusual and noteworthy. According to our analysis, the abuse directed at Ayyub on Twitter was frequently triggered by her commentary and reporting. But all Ayyub has to do is “open her mouth” on Twitter to attract abuse. Our data analysis demonstrates that Ayyub starts receiving abuse within 14 seconds of posting a tweet, and there is a spike in abusive replies within one to two minutes of an Ayyub tweet. She once experimented with this process by tweeting just a full stop, which sparked dozens of abusive replies, she told researchers.

The instances of abuse found in the subset of clearly abusive tweets are categorized into three main types: attacks on professional credibility, personal attacks, and belief-based attacks,<sup>46</sup> as depicted in Figure 9 and discussed in detail below.

## 4.2 Key abuse spikes

The waves of abuse that follow Ayyub are mostly linked to her critical reporting and commentary on communal violence, human rights abuses and politics in India. Her *Washington Post* bio page states that key topics include “religious violence, extrajudicial killings by the state and insurgency”.

The three main online violence spikes evident in our dataset all occurred in 2020, and they all coincided with reporting and commentary by Ayyub about the implications of Modi government policies for religious minorities.

<sup>45</sup> The 3,390 are the number of tweets that received at least one abusive reply, not just one reply.

<sup>46</sup> Note that in our previous research applying the classifiers to the [cases of Maria Ressa and Carole Cadwalladr](#), we did not distinguish a category of “belief-based attacks” specifically. We have added this category in this case study specifically because religious attacks play a more prominent role here and are often intertwined with gendered and politically-based attacks.



FIGURE 9: Distribution of abusive tweets between 12 December 2019, 06:07:00 and 1 March 2022, 00:00:00.

- January 2020: [Ayyub's opinion piece](#) in the *Washington Post* condemns Prime Minister Modi's "divisive agenda to polarize India on religious lines", amidst debate around the Citizenship Amendment Act, viewed as discriminatory towards Muslims.
- April 2020: Another abuse spike occurs when Ayyub [tweets](#) about an article reporting a COVID-19 outbreak in a Muslim congregation which met during lockdown: "While the world is fighting a pandemic, our government continues to vilify Muslims and amplify hate against them".
- August 2020: [Opinion piece](#) by Ayyub in the *Washington Post* discussing the rise of Islamophobia and the spreading of anti-Muslim propaganda in Modi's India. She [tweeted](#) about it, and in the article she talked about her "extensive" reporting on the "rise of majoritarianism and Islamophobia in Modi's India":

*"It has been exacting on the mind and soul to repeat myself in every column, warning the world of the depravity of the regime and the immorality of a populace that has normalized the naked hatred being disseminated in the country, particularly during a devastating pandemic."*

## 4.3 Categorizing the abuse: dominant themes and tropes

Ayyub's reporting on the rising tide of Islamophobia in India and her sharp critique of the Modi government are almost without exception countered by Twitter mobs demonstrating far right and Hindu Nationalist tendencies. In response to her often highly charged tweets highlighting these issues, including in connection with her published

journalism and commentary, she is frequently accused of lying, spreading 'fake news,' being stupid, being a fraudster, a 'jihadi' or a 'terrorist' and "instigating communal riots". The primary topics associated with the most frequently occurring abusive terms are related to Muslims, Islam, Pakistan, India, and religion more generally. This is supported by an analysis of the abuse types we see in the clearly abusive tweets.

The predominant category of abuse towards Ayyub on Twitter was 'personal attacks,' which constituted 62.05% of all abuse. Attacks on Ayyub's credibility are also prominent, accounting for 34.80% of all abuse, with gender-based abuse targeting her credibility constituting 3.86% of all abuse. Homophobic, racist (3.32% of all abuse), and religion-based abuse (2.15% of the total) are also clearly identifiable.

**62%** of all abuse is classed as personal attacks, which include:

- Sexist, misogynistic, and explicit abuse (24% of the total abuse encountered)
- Racist abuse (3.32% of the total abuse encountered)
- Other general insults aimed at Ayyub (34.54% of the total abuse encountered)

**34.8%** of all abuse was identified as credibility-related (i.e. attacks on professional reputation), which include:

- Gender-based attacks on credibility (3.86% of the total abuse)

**3.15%** of all abuse is classified as belief-based, which include:

- Religious abuse (2.15% of the total abuse)
- Political abuse (1% of the total)

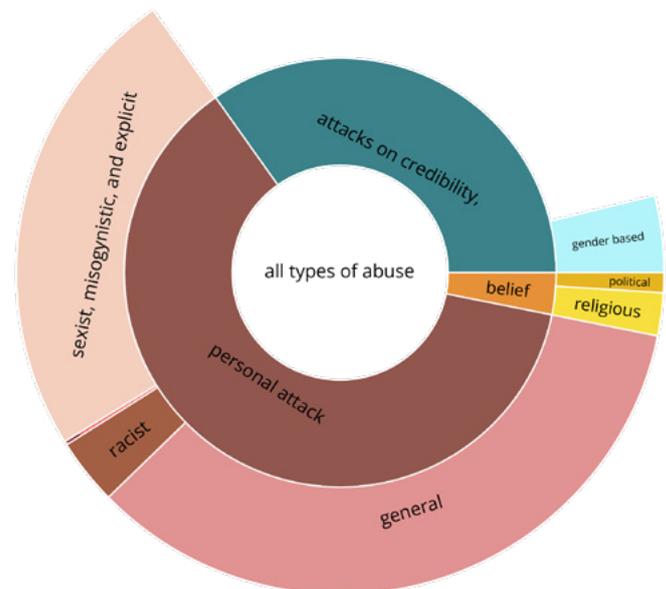


FIGURE 10: Visualization of the categorization of abuse types.

Now, we will further divide the abuse types into sub-categories for more detailed analysis.

# 4.4. 'Presstitutes', explicit deep fakes, and misogynistic online auctions

Rana Ayyub is daily subjected to a barrage of misogynistic and sexist abuse. As outlined above, sexist, misogynistic, and sexually explicit personal attacks represent 24% of all abuse, while gender-based attacks on credibility account for a further 3.86% of all abuse.

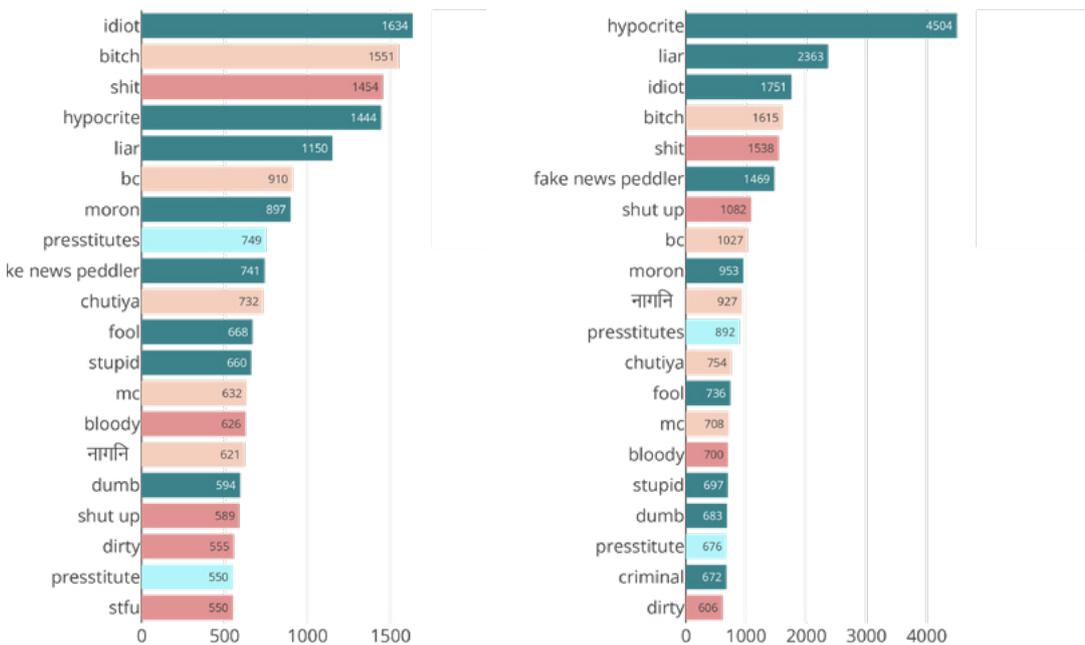


FIGURE 11: Concrete examples of the top 20 abusive phrases against Ayyub in all abusive tweets, ordered by frequency and colored according to the sub-category of abuse they belong to.

Looking at the abusive tweets, and replies containing abuse, the most prevalent abuse hashtag hurled at Rana Ayyub is the misogynistic portmanteau #presstitutes, which originated in India in 2014 and is designed to discredit women journalists both professionally and personally. Other prominent hashtags are #pkmkb and #harami\_kaum, attacking Ayyub’s religious background (see discussion in Section 4.6).



FIGURE 12: Word clouds of top 25 hashtags seen in abusive tweets in our dataset highlight the prevalence of misogynistic abuse against Ayyub, including the highly offensive portmanteau #Presstitutes.

This pernicious slur is also used and amplified by high-level authorities, including a minister who [semi-apologised](#) for the [use of the term](#) against “90% of the press”, saying he “used the word for the 10 per cent and they deserve that word”



FIGURE 13: The term “presstitute” has been used by the Minister of State for External Affairs, General V. K. Singh, a former army chief and central government minister in India since [at least 2014](#), drawing the concern of the Editors Guild of India, who put out a statement in defense of press freedom.<sup>47</sup>

The intermingling of gendered abuse like ‘presstitutes’, ‘whore’, ‘witch’, ‘hag’ and ‘bitch’ with abuse designed to undermine Ayyub’s professional credibility and trust such as ‘fake news peddler’, ‘hypocrite’, ‘liar’, and ‘scammer’ is clear in the word cloud below, which represents the 100 most prevalent abusive terms in our dataset.

47 In 2014 the [Editors Guild of India](#) said it was “distressing to find a person like General V. K. Singh using the term ‘presstitutes’ to describe journalists who wrote a story on the movement of army units causing concern to the government, a statement unbecoming of a former chief of the Indian army”.



Ayyub believes that in India the character assassination of a woman is the easiest way to neutralize her:

*It's a patriarchal setup, where at the end of the day, you will only believe one side of the view and somehow the character thing really hits you bad. So I do go quiet, and the moment I would start tweeting again, they [trolls] would start putting the screenshots again. I would then go into a shell.*

In 2012, Ayyub was accused of being seen with an intelligence officer in a purportedly salacious video following another investigative story she wrote on Amit Shah.<sup>49</sup> Although the existence of the footage was never established, the accusation triggered a barrage of online attacks with the use of the hashtag #ranaayyubCD on Twitter designed to fuel interest in the rumors. As Ayyub told us, "With a woman, when you say 'a video,' you don't need to say anything else, because then you are letting them know that something exists, but something does not really exist."

At the time, Ayyub's then-managing editor at *Tehelka*, Shoma Chaudhary, wrote an [editorial](#) blasting the sexist and Islamophobic campaign:

*Over the past three years, Rana — one of Tehelka's most sterling and fearless journalists — has doggedly chased the story of fake encounters in Gujarat. Her journalism has been driven by a keen sense of justice and constitutional values. Yet, as her scoops...began to make national headlines, she has had to face the humiliating experience of being assessed not as a professional but as a 'Muslim journalist'. Equally dismaying, a despicable slander campaign has been unleashed against her — shadowy whispers about a CD involving her and CBI officers that have absolutely no basis in truth. India is an imperfect experiment. But if we abandon the poetic idea that underpins it, this is what we will get: 'Hindu nationalists', 'Muslim journalists', and women professionals we try to defang with scurrilous lies.*

As the BJP, led by Modi, came to power in 2014, the hatred and abuse directed against Ayyub grew manifoldly. And after the publication of her 2016 book about Gujarat Riots investigation - *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover-Up*<sup>50</sup> - she found herself the target of persistent and apparently coordinated troll attacks.

She recalls an incident involving a police officer from Gujarat whom she had mentioned in her book. In a 2017 [Facebook post](#)<sup>51</sup> the officer accused an unnamed journalist of 'honey-trapping' police officers, but a news channel named Ayyub as the journalist in question:

49 These stories pertained to a woman called Ishrat Jahan, whom Ayyub said was killed in a controversial 'police encounter' during Amit Shah's tenure as Home Minister of Gujarat.

50 To date, the book has sold 750,000 copies in 14 languages.

51 The [Facebook post by Sanjiv Bhatt](#) reads: "The lawyer activist fell easy prey to the charms of the dusky chain smoking journalist and was more than happy to share juicy case details with her... The journalist wanted more... The younger of the two IPS officers was attracted to the journalist and she was attracted to him... little did the two lovers know at that time that the Government Guest Houses where they used to meet for their amorous peccadilloes were discreetly bugged by the operatives of the State Police."

That post went viral on social media. And 'India Today', which is one of the leading news channels in the country, put out a headline that said 'Top Cop in Gujarat Accuses Journalist Rana Ayyub of Honey Trap'. That cop didn't name me, but these guys named me. Till today that thing has been used against me time and again to kind of delegitimize me or discredit me.

In 2017, an old [tweet](#) from 2014 (in which Ayyub quotes and dismisses an abusive tweet about Hindu nationalism directed towards her)<sup>52</sup> resurfaced and was misrepresented by trolls as sexually explicit abuse being used by Ayyub against another user. It [went viral](#) and Ayyub was accused of indecent behavior and bombarded with religious slurs and demeaning abuse in response.

FIGURE 16: A 2014 tweet of Ayyub's is [reshared](#). The impression created by this old-style 'quote tweet' is that Ayyub is insulting Hindu problems, with a "m\*therf\*cker" style insult written in Hindi using Latin script.



The following year, in 2018, an eight-year-old girl was abducted, gang-raped and killed by six Hindu men in the Kathua district of the Indian administered, Muslim-majority region of Jammu & Kashmir. After being critical of local BJP leaders who had defended the Hindu suspects during an Al Jazeera interview, Ayyub's Muslim identity was conflated with her critical journalism. She faced rape and murder threats, and she was called "Islamist", "Jihadi Jane", and "ISIS sex slave". Her abusers [called for mob attacks](#) on Ayyub: "Go to her place, gang-rape her so she can understand how it's done".

Then, an imposter tweet purporting to show Ayyub's "[support for child rapists](#)" went [viral](#). It was [shared](#) by Hindu far right sites, including Yogi Adityanath ki Sena (@YogiGKP) - a popular right-wing Facebook page named after the the former monk Ajay Singh Bisht, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous state in the north), who is viewed as [Modi's successor](#).

A year later, the fraudulent tweet was still circulating after being [amplified](#) by a number of prominent Indian figures, including film director Ashok Pandit (president of the Indian Film & Television Directors' Association), escalating the risk that the online threats would spill offline.

FIGURE 17: Ayyub [addresses](#) a persistently viral fake tweet in which she appears to defend child rapists.



On 23 April 2018, a deep fake pornographic video with Ayyub's face superimposed on one of the actor's heads went viral. She was [slut-shamed](#), and screenshots of the video were published on social media,

52 There was no 'quote tweet' function on Twitter until 2020. In 2014, Ayyub had recopied an abusive post adding the word 'Discourse' in front of it. It said "@RanaAyyub talking abt hindu problems is communal??teri maa ki chut saale" - the Hindi part meaning "your mother's pussy bitch". The Twitter user - whose [profile bio](#) at the time of writing is "I exist because of @RanaAyyub", and location is tagged as "Where There Is RanaAyyub" - had used abusive language in a (now deleted) tweet, and Ayyub had made that abuse public by adding the word 'Discourse' before it. Ayyub's 'quote tweet' was designed to underscore how far the discourse of the Hindu right wing has penetrated. She was hugely trolled by the right wing for the tweet.

amplified by media personalities. She was also doxxed, with her phone number being shared widely on social media. Recalling this period, Ayyub told us: "I stepped out to a cafe and all I could think of was people looking at me. Are people looking at me and are they thinking that I'm a promiscuous woman?"

In an interview for the now-defunct HuffPost India,<sup>53</sup> Ayyub described how the abuse spread across platforms, and she said she was forced to temporarily disable her Facebook account. The video was amplified on the fanpage of BJP leader Yogi Adityanath, Modi's close aide and chief minister of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh; Ayyub was hospitalized after she was doxxed and received messages on WhatsApp soliciting for sex. In 2018, she said: "It ended up on almost every phone in India... It was devastating. I just couldn't show my face. You can call yourself a journalist, you can call yourself a feminist but in that moment... I just couldn't see through the humiliation."

FIGURE 18: Ayyub shares a series of fraudulent tweets misappropriating her identity which have been manipulated by Photoshop and deep fake AI technologies, including a fake tweet from Air India booking her a one-way flight to Pakistan.



Ayyub reported the video to the police in April 2018. A month later, as discussed above, UN experts intervened to lambast the Indian government for failing to act to protect Ayyub in the context of the gendered disinformation she had experienced: "We are highly concerned that the life of Rana Ayyub is at serious risk following these graphic and disturbing threats"

She is still waiting for justice regarding the damaging deep fake porn video first circulated in 2018. The matter was closed by the Delhi Police in 2020, with no tangible outcome.

FIGURE 19: In July 2020, Ayyub shared various examples of abuse in her private Twitter Direct Messages, written in Hindi (sometimes using English script), using religiously bigoted terms such as 'go to Pakistan' and slurs about Ayyub as a Muslim as well as a woman, but also complete with obscene rape and death threats. Ayyub tags Mumbai Police on Twitter, and adds that she is "reminded of Gauri Lankesh", her friend who was murdered after online threats.



In January 2022, Ayyub was among 100 Muslim women listed for "online auction" on an app called 'Bulli bai', hosted on Github. Images of the women were misappropriated as part of the sexist and demeaning attack. Several journalists were among those targeted and all of them were Muslim. The other thing they had in common was they had all been critical of the Modi government and its treatment of religious minorities. Bulli Bai (like its predecessor Sulli Deals)<sup>54</sup> was developed by right-wing Hindu nationalists.

The deepfake content designed to present her as promiscuous - along with the slut shaming, rape threats, abuse and gendered slurs - are designed not just to frighten Ayyub into retreat and chill writing, but also to destroy her

53 HuffPost India was shuttered in November 2020, and the original article is now offline.

54 'Sulli' is a derogatory term used for Muslims; it is a slang expression believed to be a combination of 'saali' - "sister in law" - and "mulli" or "woman imam (priest)".

social standing and respectability. In a culturally and religiously conservative country like India, questions raised about a woman's character or morality can lead to significant reputational damage and increase the physical risks she faces.

But as Ayyub [has written](#), it is the intersectional nature of the attacks she experiences - at the nexus of misogyny and Islamophobia - which makes the attacks even more damaging.

*There is a section of the Indian media—and Indian society writ large—that refuses to see this as yet another assault on the Muslim community. The auction of Muslim women comes just three days after open calls for the genocide of Muslims in the national capital, by nationalists including members of Modi's party, but liberals prefer to see this as a problem of misogyny, rather than of Islamophobia.*

## 4.5 Religious bigotry and the digital lynch mob: 'Jihadi', 'terrorist' and 'defamer' of India

Rana Ayyub's case presents a striking example of online violence at the intersection of misogyny and religious bigotry. According to our analysis, misogynistic, sexist and sexually explicit abuse was a dominant feature of abuse across our dataset. But religion and belief-based abuse was also prevalent.

Abuse in this category casts Ayyub as a threat to Hindus and an anti-nationalist in response to her strong identification as a Muslim and her ongoing advocacy for India's Muslim communities. In this context, she is branded a "Jihadi", a "terrorist" and a "defamer" of India. In one instance, the Karnataka state unit of the BJP [referred](#) to Ayyub as "jihadi" in response to one of her tweets.



FIGURE 20: On Reddit, a quote tweet is shared from the BJP Karnataka state Twitter account referring to Ayyub as “jihadi” in response to one of her tweets.

Ayyub’s international commentary over discrimination against girls wearing hijabs to school in one Indian region has also attracted abuse. As discussed earlier, Ayyub gave an interview to the BBC in November 2021 in which she was critical of a Hindu-identifying mob which had encircled a Muslim student wearing a hijab, calling them “Hindu terrorists”. This took place during a moral panic over Muslim women wearing the hijab in India, after students wearing the Islamic headscarf were denied admission to colleges. She reported a significant online backlash in connection with this episode and it is also evident in our data.

In order to demonstrate the abuse Ayyub experiences at the nexus of misogyny and religious bigotry, we studied all uses of the term ‘presstitute/s’ in our dataset in combination with terms pertaining to her religious identity. The clearly misogynistic portmanteau - which targets Ayyub both as a woman and in her professional capacity as a journalist - is very often accompanied by abuse which could be interpreted as Islamophobic. In fact, 29.3% of abuse directed at Rana Ayyub in conjunction with the term ‘presstitute’ can be interpreted as religious bigotry.

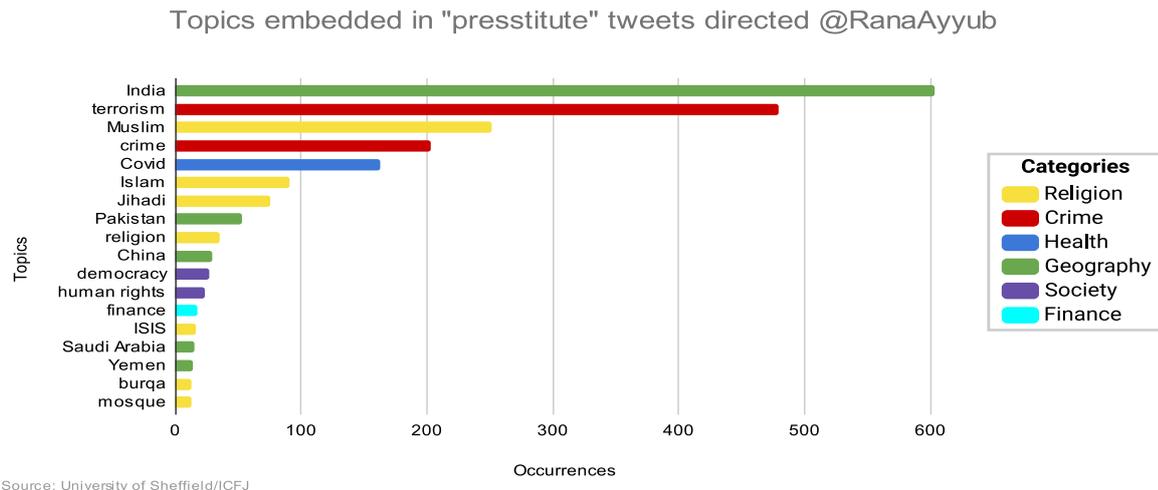


FIGURE 21: This graph demonstrates the prevalence of religious bigotry in abusive tweets deploying the insult "presstitute", highlighting the intersectional nature of the online violence that Ayyub experiences.

Ayyub, who bears a Muslim name and is a bold defender of Muslim minorities online while also being extremely critical of Modi's Hindu nationalist government, was not surprised at these findings:

*My journalism has always, always been viewed from the prism of my faith... This ecosystem is from a majority community and you realize every day gradually it's unraveling that a big part of the problem is my Muslimness... Every time I speak about an issue, people are always looking at the Muslimness of the story - who wrote the story?*

Kunal Majumder from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in India told researchers that the data shows a systematic pattern in which Muslim women journalists are being targeted across the country<sup>55</sup> by the government and its followers. These journalists are being intimidated<sup>56</sup> not only through online violence but also via judicial harassment: "These are based on observations backed by facts that over the last one year, mostly the journalists who have been targeted are women and most of them are Muslims."

Among the most amplified abusive tweets directed at Rana Ayyub in our database, (i.e. when re-tweeted abuse is included) are posts including the hashtags #delhigenocide2020, #delhiriots. The hashtags point towards the February 2020 communal violence in north-east Delhi in which more than 50 people, mostly Muslims,<sup>57</sup> were killed following protests by the minority community against the 'discriminatory' Citizenship Amendment Act passed by the Modi government the previous year. The Act allowed non-Muslims

55 Other prominent Muslim woman journalists being targeted include Fatima Khan (then of The Print) and Ismat Ara (The Wire). In January 2022, they were two of 80 women - including Ayyub - to be offered up for an "online auction" on the now-defunct bullibai.github.io website and app. Ara filed a "First Information Report" (FIR) asking for the Islamophobic abuse and doctored image of her to be investigated by Delhi Police's cyber cell unit. In an [interview with Al Jazeera English in July 2021](#), Khan said it comes in a climate where women are speaking out more about this misogynistic and Islamophobic abuse, in a culture of impunity.

56 Majumder said that the targeted group also includes those "who are relatively new to the profession", such as journalism students - including those studying at international universities.

57 A sit-in by women against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was in progress when a leader of the ruling party (BJP) asked the Delhi police to 'clear the streets of these protestors', failing which he would clear the streets with his supporters. A clash broke out between Hindus and Muslims. However, Muslims bore the brunt of the bloodshed, property destruction, and rioting. Hindu mobs beat, lynched, and burnt Muslims. Mosques were burnt, Muslim businesses and properties were destroyed, Muslims were dragged out of their houses and were burnt alive and lynched. While Hindus also suffered losses, Muslims were disproportionately targeted in the riots. The police were accused of enabling and encouraging (allegedly joining) the Hindu mobs.

from neighboring Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh to [fast-track visa applications](#). Ayyub's Twitter abusers alleged she was lying or exaggerating the situation due to a Muslim bias, thus attacking her journalistic credibility and professional reputation with the effect of undercutting her criticism of the Modi government.

In July 2020, when she sent a few tweets criticizing the Indian state's handling of the conflict-torn Kashmir valley, Ayyub was subjected to yet another online barrage. "When I speak about Kashmir, trolls from all sides come and attack me," Ayyub told researchers. In Indian administered Kashmir, another overwhelmingly Muslim region, journalists doing their job are [arrested](#) for allegedly posting "anti-national posts". For example, in northeastern states like [Tripura](#), journalists have been charged under the [Unlawful Activities \(Prevention\) Act](#) for reporting during communal riots in the state.



FIGURE 22: An online troll accusing Rana Ayyub of siding with the "anti-India nexus". Ayyub is often termed as "anti-India" and "anti-national" for calling out state violence in the conflict torn Muslim-majority region of Indian Administered Kashmir.

## 4.6 Foreigners and foreign State actors

Delving deeper into the data, we also see abuse towards Ayyub designed to suggest her alignment with foreign Muslim States and fuel enmity towards her from Indian nationalists. For example, we identified the hashtag #pkmb ("Pakistan ki maa ka bhosda" in Hindi, which loosely translates to the "vagina of Pakistan's mother") as the second most prominent hashtag featured in the abuse dataset after #presstitutes. 'Pkmkb' is an abusive phrase used to propagate aggression and hatred towards Pakistan.

It was first used to mock the Pakistani cricket team but started trending in February 2019 after the [Pulwama attack](#), when a convoy of vehicles carrying Indian security personnel was attacked by a suicide bomber in the state of Jammu & Kashmir. The #pkmb hashtag is used in tweets as an abusive hashtag and also just to reference Pakistan. Ayyub is often told to "return to Pakistan" or that she belongs there. Most of the tweets associated with this term just contain multiple user handles followed by hashtags referencing Pakistan, terrorism, and Islam, a pattern of behavior which can be associated with incitement to pile-on.

Another example is #harami\_kaum, an abusive phrase used to reference the Muslim community in India specifically. Use of this term demonstrates how persistent some of the troll accounts targeting Ayyub are. The hashtag in Hindi seems to have been used and amplified exclusively by one Twitter user, who posted 568 tweets with that hashtag between July 2021 and Feb 2022. Many were replies to their own tweets, repeatedly trying to draw others into the abuse through the use of mentions and hashtags.

Both hashtags explicitly reflect the anti-Muslim rhetoric used by right-wing Hindus, where Muslims as a whole are referred to as 'Bastard Nation'. The 'Go to Pakistan' rhetoric is also favored by the ruling BJP party and its supporters. Any Muslim living in India and seen as a critic of the government is considered loyal to India's regional

rival Pakistan (a Muslim-majority state) by right-wing Hindu nationalists. Thus, Ayyub is often called on to 'prove' her nationalism.

A prominent spike in online abuse in the Twitter dataset occurred between 10 and 12 November 2021, when Ayyub received 660 abusive tweets while tweeting about a cricket match between Australia and Pakistan. Unlike previous spikes, where the abuse detected was predominantly in English, in this case, over 30% of abusive tweets are in Hindi and only 24% in English.

A Pakistani ministerial tweet [praising](#) Ayyub's reporting in January 2020 led to an abusive backlash against Ayyub on various news media channels and online. She was labeled anti-national, and received a barrage of insults and taunts on Twitter for getting praise from 'enemy' Pakistan and revealing her "real motives". This is reflected by a small abuse spike in our data.

An anchor for Republic TV, with a pro-government editorial line, [said](#): "Doesn't really come as a surprise, but Pakistan has literally gone on to state on record and Rana Ayyub here winning praises from Pakistan. She has received basically an award or commendation from Pakistan for attacking the government relentlessly".

FIGURE 23: A tweet from the account of a Pakistani minister in support of Ayyub's reporting led to a pile-on against her, fanning the flames of anti-nationalism.

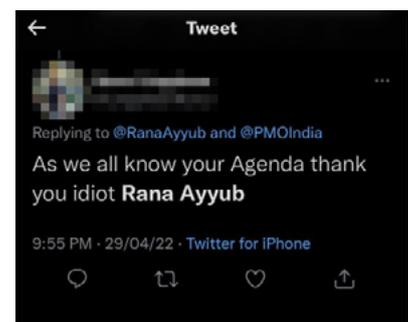


Republic TV even [conducted](#) a debate on the issue. Journalist Arnab Goswami termed Ayyub "insanely anti-India", while repeatedly referring to her as a troll and part of "Lutyens' Media"<sup>58</sup> working against the nation. Ayyub wondered how a news channel "could spend half an hour on me getting funding from Imran Khan...how are you not scared of defamation? They're not scared of anything".

The majority of TV news channels in India prioritize [highly emotionally-charged debates](#) which are devoid of reporting and frequently focused on [vilifying minorities](#).<sup>59</sup> Many of these channels are blatant in their [endorsement](#) of the Modi government and its policies. Those criticizing the establishment view, including Ayyub, are routinely attacked by these channels, which often label them as 'anti-national', fuelling online attacks.

Government officials such as Minority Affairs Minister Abbas Naqvi Mukhtar have also [weighed in](#), further fueling the online threats against Ayyub by targeting her on these partisan TV talk shows. "Rana Ayyub is a part of a global conspiracy to defame India," he said in a TV debate. In another prime time debate, the national spokesperson of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Syed Zafar Islam, said: "Rana Ayyub works against the interests of our nation. It is beyond any doubt... I have no hesitation telling that she is anti-national, works at the behest of Pakistan and some foreign media".

FIGURE 24: An insulting reply to a tweet claiming to know Ayyub's "agenda" and calling her an "idiot".



58 Lutyens is an area in Delhi that houses India's parliament and the presidential palace. It is considered to be a power center of Delhi where many journalists meet to cover India's political bigwigs. "Lutyens' media" is now often used in a derogatory way by pro-State journalists to refer to journalists who are sympathetic to the opposition and left parties.

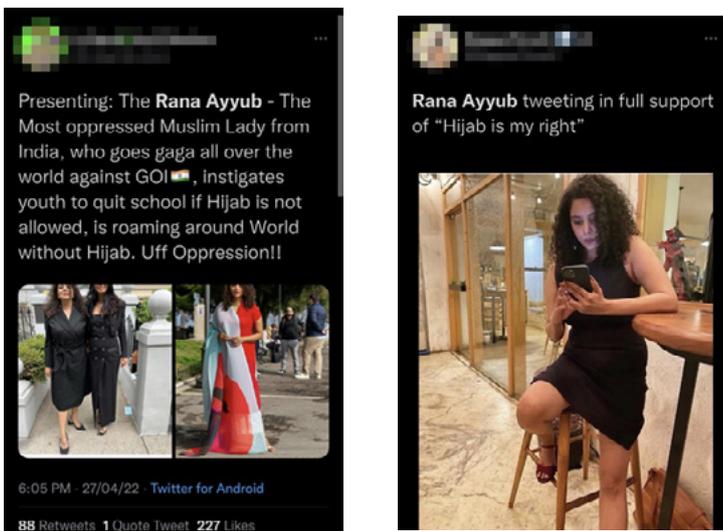
59 Research published on independent news site [News Laundry](#) found that an overwhelming majority of the primetime debates on India's mainstream national television focus on either attacking opposition parties or regional arch-rival Pakistan, or praising Modi and his party.

Having seeded these narratives over time, perpetrators have also targeted Ayyub with disinformation-based attacks designed to direct the ire of Hindu nationalists and their patriotic troll armies towards Ayyub. One **imposter tweet** purporting to be **posted by Ayyub's account** in 2017 **read**, "I despise India and Indians". Such disinformation tactics expose the target to significantly greater risk offline, especially in a country where digital lynch mobs have moved offline, leading to deaths.



FIGURES 25/26: Ayyub shares the fraudulent tweets posted in April 2018.

This portrayal of Ayyub as an "anti-nationalist" also involves portraying her as an internationalist captured by foreign interests, craving the world stage, and indulging in what is perceived to be Western conduct, not fitting with behaviors routinely associated with traditional Muslim women.



FIGURES 27/28: Abuse online is directed against Ayyub for being abroad and for the way she dresses in an effort to undermine her advocacy for Muslim Indian women and girls who choose to wear a hijab.

## #SaudiArabia



FIGURE 29: *Tweet* by Rana Ayyub which led to a spike in online abuse against her from Twitter users she perceived to be nationalist Saudi trolls online.

When Ayyub tweeted strident criticism of the [Saudi-led coalition](#) backing the Yemeni government against the Houthi group supported by Iran, she said she received [thousands of hateful responses](#). They included [multiple](#) rape and death threats, along with abuse calling her a terrorist sympathizer. The numerous hate comments she received caused her name to trend on Twitter for many days.

Relevantly, the hashtags [#saudi](#), and [#saudiarabia](#) are among the most amplified abusive tweets directed at Rana Ayyub in our database. They are used in tweets accusing Ayyub of making false statements (including calling her a liar, a 'presstitute' or a snake), or questioning her credibility. It is particularly striking that the following [tweet](#) (originally posted by an [account](#) with 65,000 followers) has been repeated verbatim, or with additional text, in 1,673 tweets (103 original, replies, or quoted retweets and 1,570 verbatim retweets of these):

*Saudis are rightly thrashing<sup>60</sup> Rana Ayyub for her meltdown on Saudi Arabia airstrikes against Yemen. Her CREDIBILITY has always been Questionable. Here Journalist Dhume @dhume POINT BLANK STATES 'I question the Credibility of Rana' #SaudiArabia #Saudi*

60 According to an investigation by The Quint, 'Modi follows a handful of over 2,300 people, including the likes of Nikhil Dadhich who celebrated the assassination of journalist Gauri Lankesh'. The article also names two accounts who have abused Ayyub, but are allegedly followed by Modi.

# 5 PERPETRATION AND FACILITATION:

High speed, virtually unchecked, and potentially coordinated abuse

An important aspect of the online violence directed at Rana Ayyub is the apparently coordinated nature of the pile-ons targeting her. These involve accounts that appear to be designed for and dedicated to trolling. In some cases, they are followed by top leaders of the ruling party, including Prime Minister Modi.<sup>61</sup>

Ayyub's former editor at the *Washington Post*, Elias Lopez, told us about the "echo chamber" created in response to Ayyub's journalism because of coordinated attacks by highly organized online groups "that are very close to the government" and are "right wing cells". The effect on this reaction to Ayyub and her journalism, he said, is "very propagandizing":

<sup>61</sup> According to an investigation by The Quint, 'Modi follows a handful of over 2,300 people, including the likes of Nikhil Dadhich who celebrated the assassination of journalist Gauri Lankesh'. The article also names two accounts who have abused Ayyub, but are allegedly followed by Modi.

**"WHAT WE SEE IS THAT  
ONCE A LIE IS REPEATED BY  
THESE GROUPS, IT IS PICKED  
UP BY MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS  
THAT ARE IDEOLOGICALLY  
CLOSE TO THESE GROUPS,  
AND OBVIOUSLY DESIGNED  
TO AMPLIFY THEIR BASELESS  
CLAIMS AGAINST RANA."**

## Almost instantaneous abuse

A particularly important, and to date overlooked aspect of online abuse and trolling is how quickly abusive replies to Ayyub start to pile up when she tweets. The speed of abusive replies is noteworthy as a potential indicator of coordination or orchestration.

Our data analysis demonstrated that Ayyub can start receiving abusive replies within 14 seconds of posting a tweet. As can be seen from the graph below, there is a spike in abusive replies within one to two minutes of a post by Ayyub, with abuse starting to tail off gradually, but still running at high levels for the first 10-15 minutes.

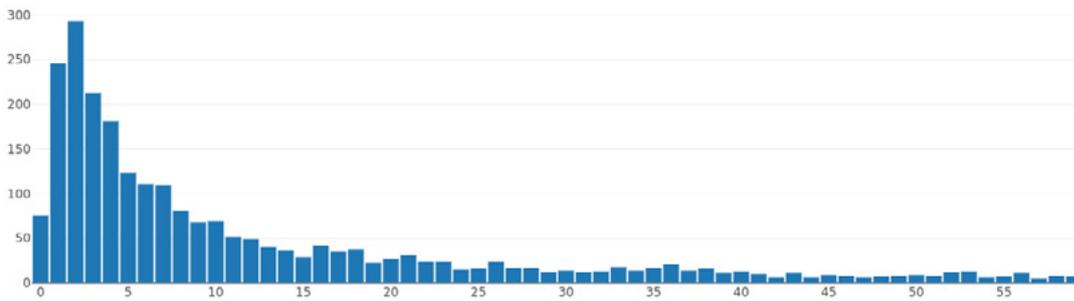


FIGURE 30: Number of minutes until the first abusive reply to tweets by Rana Ayyub.

The shape of this abuse curve is very unusual and indicates that soon after posting, Ayyub is highly likely to be exposed to a lot of abusive replies. By way of comparison, according to our [Big Data Case Study on Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa](#), the abuse she sustains on Twitter, while still severe, tends to be more spread out over time.

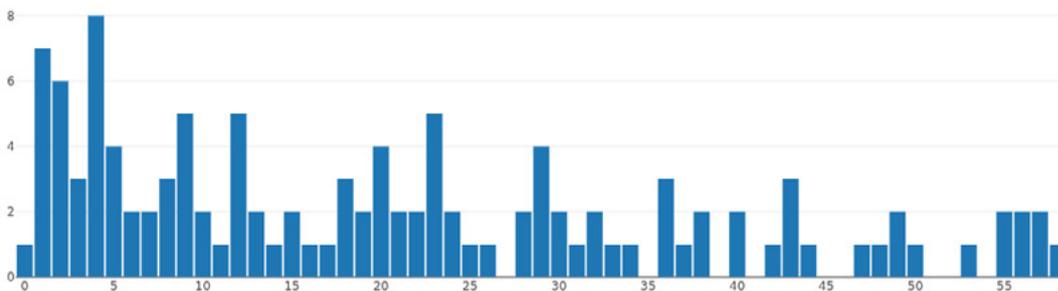


FIGURE 31: For comparison: the number of minutes until the first abusive reply to tweets by renowned Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa.

## Who are Rana Ayyub's attackers?

In the climate of impunity surrounding attacks on journalists in India, and especially Muslim journalists, Ayyub's online attackers have become emboldened and many have emerged as identifiable perpetrators. They are also now more inclined to hurl threats and abuse in more public social media spaces, rather than from locked accounts or private messages, Ayyub said:

*The people who would earlier DM me abusive things and ask me about rape, now... they post on my timeline... It used to be bots. Now they are people with an identity and they're not scared, they put their [profile] picture, and they're not scared to give a death and rape threat... If you go and see, it's very scary because they're all very young boys. And if you see their Instagram pages, they're normal living, breathing people.*

In early 2023, on her return to India from the US to face court, [Ayyub told Canada's CBC](#): "This gentleman — who's not a bot, who has a profile picture with his child — has sent me a note that he is going to come to my house and cut me to pieces ... for defaming India on an international level, for defaming Hindus on an international level!"

When we plot the graph of the 500 accounts which sent the most abuse in replies to Rana's tweets, we see a dense, inter-connected network. This indicates that many accounts sent abusive replies to the same set of tweets.

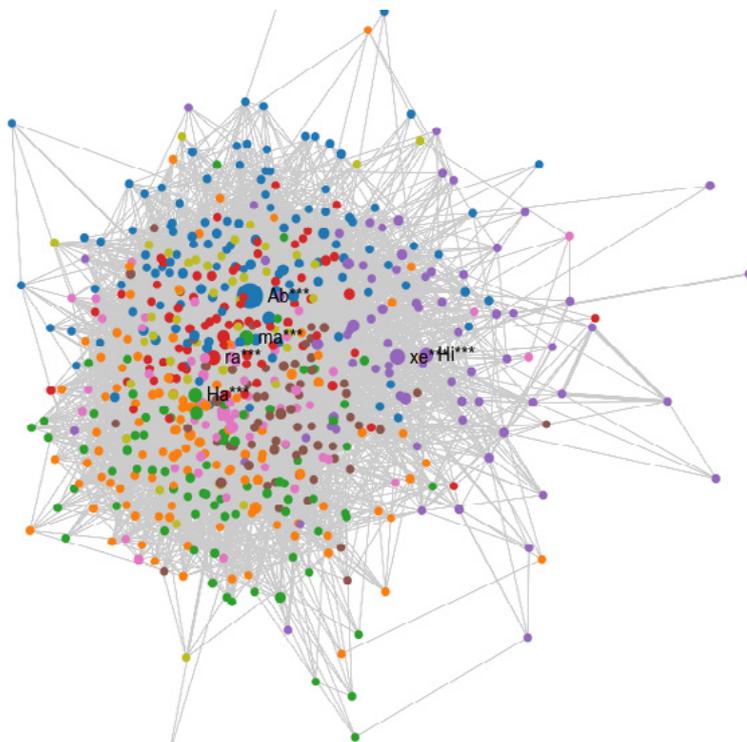


FIGURE 32: Graph of 500 anonymized accounts which co-abused Ayyub by sending abusive replies to one or more of the same tweets by Ayyub; the thicker the edges between them, the more abusive replies they sent to the same tweet(s).

According to our analysis, one account colored in blue stands out in particular because it provided numerous hostile replies to 27 of Ayyub's tweets. When we examine it further, it appears to be at the heart of a network of accounts that coordinate to troll and abuse Ayyub. It also has some relationships to other communities of accounts that have co-abused Ayyub.

The dominant Twitter account in the network map of co-abusers above (Figure 32) is currently inactive, but it continues to be tagged in numerous tweets and is often co-tagged with high-profile personalities affiliated with Hindu nationalists, including members of the ruling BJP party. These tweets are mostly either directly targeting Muslims or are replies to such tweets. Another account sending a lot of abuse has been suspended by Twitter for violating its terms of service. It is most likely that this troll account was registered earlier under a very similar handle and therefore it is highly likely that it will surface again. An account that stands at the center of the red-colored community depicted in the graph has a handle derived from Harry Potter and originally joined Twitter in December 2019.

Several other accounts in prominent positions in the main network graph in Figure 32 were investigated, including:

- An account which has been on Twitter since November 2015, with a modest set of followers (145 as of June 2022). Via Botometer,<sup>62</sup> a random sample of 20 of these followers was checked: 9 of them were flagged as orange or red (i.e., suspicious), with two others being flagged as inactive without a timeline (another potential marker of a suspicious account). Many of the flagged accounts had Twitter handles consisting of a common name like 'Amit' or 'Jenny', and were followed by several accounts similar in format to the suspended account discussed above.
- An account with 1966 in the handle, which could be their birth year, joined Twitter in 2011 and is followed by just over 700 users, while following more than 2,000 itself. Fewer of its random sample of 20 followers were flagged as suspicious by Botometer compared to the account above. It has a 22% retweet ratio (which is high and potentially indicative of a troll account). The user's description says that the user is a Hindu who believes in Modi.
- Another account in this cluster self-identifies as a vegan and animal liberation activist and has a 29% retweet ratio (which is high and potentially indicative of a troll account). With 99 followers, the user has been on Twitter since October 2018. A Botometer check of a random sample of 20 of these followers flagged 8 of these as orange or red, with three of them flagged as inactive without a timeline. Most of the followers have a higher bot score than the user. Two of the followers with the highest bot score were accounts with non-south Asian names ('Lin' and 'Jiao').

62 Botometer is a bot-detection program that monitors the activity of Twitter accounts and classifies them as a human or a bot based on a score.

## **Twitter as an online violence facilitator and failed responder**

Ayyub's response to the rapid-fire online violence she experiences has included multiple attempts – publicly and privately, online and offline – to call Twitter to act against her abusers as the primary vector for the online violence she experiences. And, although a number of accounts prevalent in our abuse dataset were suspended during the period of study, the scale and unrelenting nature of the online violence that Ayyub experiences are indicative of Twitter's abject failure to stem the tide of abuse.

This is despite the fact that Ayyub has a verified Twitter account, she routinely reports the abuse she receives to the platform, and her high-profile case has been placed on the company's radar by civil society organizations many times over the past decade. As Ayyub told us: "There is absolutely no sincerity in their promises!" However, she acknowledges that had it not been for [Twitter](#), "the people of this country would probably not be aware of what I'm facing in India. So, to that extent, it's a great platform. But the cons outweigh the pros awfully."

While Twitter has failed to effectively address the relentless abuse that Ayyub experiences on the platform, in June 2022 it [censored a number of her tweets](#) at the behest of the Indian government. "The trolls and the State have realized that these social media platforms are dependent on them. They [Twitter] really are seeing only their market and not the safety of journalists or anybody who's a public voice," Ayyub said. However, Twitter commenced [legal action](#) against the Indian government over the censorship order the following month, reportedly arguing that it was "overbroad, arbitrary and disproportionate".

# 6

## CONCLUSION

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Impunity for the online violence against Rana Ayyub on Twitter, and across the social web, increases her exposure to offline harm in one of the world's most dangerous countries to practice journalism. It is also a significant feature of the enabling environment for Ayyub's legal harassment.

While her experiences are far from unique in India, her case is emblematic of the targeting of female journalists in the country. The hallmarks of these attacks are the digital 'lynch mobs' that align themselves with India's Hindu nationalist ruling party. Such attacks are invariably overtly misogynistic and disinformation-laced. In Ayyub's case, they also operate at the intersection of religious bigotry, with her Muslim faith being targeted in attacks that have seen her branded a 'jihadi' and a 'terrorist'.

These attacks are fanned and fuelled by heavily partisan tabloid TV networks and propaganda websites masquerading as news outlets that frame her critical reporting and commentary for international news organizations as evidence of foreign influence and disloyalty to India, making her an even bigger target.

**The clear objective is to silence Ayyub. But the more she is attacked, the harder she fights back. As a journalist, as a Muslim, and as a woman.**

# POSTSCRIPT

In February 2023, as this report was being finalized for publication, Mumbai police registered a case against the author of the misogynistic cartoon depicting Ayyub with inflated breasts and bags of cash at Mumbai airport (See Figure 15), which spread across social media in March 2022 after she was blocked from flying to London. The police issued a First Information Report (FIR) in response to a complaint lodged by Ayyub, which was seen by the authors.

This Big Data Case Study is one of a series in production focusing on emblematic cases of gendered online violence, examining the core of digital attacks through computational analysis of millions of social media accounts blended with contextual research, to provide hard evidence to demonstrate the lived experience of journalists under attack online. This report was produced as part of a broader project investigating the development of an [Online Violence Early Warning System](#).

In partnership with computer scientists from the University of Sheffield, the project is designed to identify key indicators and metrics signaling escalation of online violence against women journalists. They are studying the two-way trajectory between online and offline attacks and developing open-source digital tools to detect, monitor and alert key responders to high-risk cases.

## FURTHER RESOURCES:

- [“Maria Ressa: Fighting an Onslaught of Online Violence”](#) (2021), the first major Big Data Case Study of its kind focused on the torrent of online violence facing women journalists who work on the new front line of journalism safety, at the epicenter of digital age risks, by ICFJ and the University of Sheffield.
- Read [further ICFJ big data case studies](#) on journalists Carole Cadwalladr (UK), Ghada Oueiss (Lebanon/Qatar), with more to come - including Carmen Aristegui (Mexico), Marianna Spring (UK) and the women journalists of Daily Maverick (South Africa).
- [The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#) (2022), a groundbreaking global study on online violence against women journalists that includes over 100 recommendations for action, by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- [“A global snapshot of the incidence and impacts of online violence against women journalists”](#) (2020), based on a survey conducted by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- [Online Violence Response Hub](#), founded by IWFM and ICFJ as a project of the Coalition Against Online Violence (COAV).

## About the authors:

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## About ICFJ:

ICFJ empowers an unparalleled global network of journalists to produce news reports that lead to better governments, stronger economies, more vibrant societies and healthier lives. ICFJ also helps improve the working lives of journalists through 'action research' collaborations on the safety of women journalists, disinformation and trust, and journalism in a post-pandemic world.

