

CARMEN ARISTEGUI:

A target of gendered disinformation,
censorship & surveillance
in a climate of impunity

BIG DATA CASE STUDY

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COVER IMAGE: Carmen Aristegui speaking during a protest about assassinated journalist Javier Valdez in 2017, where she demanded the State be held accountable for the murder of over 100 Mexican journalists with impunity. Credit: Philippe Coeytaux/ Akka Films.

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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 Carmen Aristegui.

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UPDATED JULY 2024 TO REMOVE A SELF-SELECTED AUTHOR PSEUDONYM AND RESTORE HER NAME TO THE AUTHOR CREDITS.



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INTRODUCTION

"I'M A JOURNALIST WHO HAS NOT ONLY BEEN ATTACKED ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BUT ALSO FORMALLY CENSORED OR BANNED, AND WHOSE COMMUNICATIONS HAVE BEEN ATTACKED BY PEGASUS [SPYWARE]."

Carmen Aristegui

Killing journalists with impunity is the norm in Mexico - the deadliest place in the world to practice journalism outside of an active war zone.

In a country which also experiences terrible [rates of femicide](#), it is unsurprising that gender-based online violence is also [prevalent](#). It works as an additional tool for entrenching and extending repression of female journalists. And multi-award-winning Mexican investigative reporter Carmen Aristegui Flores is a prime target.

A prominent independent journalistic voice in the Americas,¹ Aristegui also enjoys significant international recognition. Thus, she is a highly visible female journalist in a patriarchal country which sees a media worker attacked [every 13 hours](#).

Aristegui experiences [online violence](#) which seeks to chill and discredit her hard-hitting investigative journalism and critical commentary on political power abuses in Mexico, while simultaneously undermining and humiliating her at a personal level.

Her agenda-setting daily [Aristegui Noticias](#) (Aristegui News) newscast and prime-time [CNN en Español](#) talk show have led to reprisals, including targeted surveillance and gendered disinformation campaigns fueled by successive Mexican governments. Current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador has Aristegui frequently in his sights, triggering spikes in online violence towards her.

1 Aristegui has won eight national Mexican journalism prizes since 2001 - the Mexican Press Club's National Journalism Prize in 2001, 2002, 2004, 2009, 2014, with different investigative teams. She is known also to Latin American and US-Spanish speaking audiences due to her daily [CNN en Español talk show](#) 'Aristegui'.

She has [been described](#) as a “thorn in the side of Mexico’s ruling class...thanks to her dogged interview style, critical monologues and a string of high-profile investigations.”²

These investigations have made headlines globally. They include: an [exposé on a prostitution ring](#) run by members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI);³ revelations of child sexual abuse among [Mexican clergy](#); the infamous ‘[White House of Enrique Peña Nieto](#)’ presidential real estate corruption scandal,⁴ which led to her being fired multiple times⁵ and her radio show being censored for two years; and, most recently, allegations of nepotism involving the current Mexican president’s son.⁶

Smear the journalist, kill the story

According to our research, spikes in threats, harassment and abuse towards Carmen Aristegui - both online and offline - follow each of the major investigative stories she covers.

Digital security attacks are perhaps the most notable type of online violence Aristegui has experienced. She is one of the first known cases of a journalist being subjected to illegal surveillance via the notorious spyware [Pegasus](#) developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli cyberarms manufacturer.⁷ Her teenage son was a victim of the spyware too. Aristegui was also doxxed⁸ and the digital news outlet she founded, Aristegui Noticias, has been a target of cyber attacks.

But Aristegui has also been exposed to sustained sexist, misogynistic and homophobic abuse and threats online; evidently orchestrated trolling campaigns involving threatening memes; and appalling gendered disinformation. In one impunity-evoking incident, she was even ‘assassinated’ on social media.

There have been offline attacks too - including a raid on her newsroom and physical posters targeting her son,⁹ along with legal harassment.

All of these incidents appear designed to symbolically annihilate Aristegui, attacking what is most dear to her: her family; her professional credibility; and trust in her accountability journalism.

However, the veteran journalist also enjoys international recognition and popular support for her mission, values and integrity within digital and physical communities. For example, national expressions of outrage and the hashtag #TodosSomosCarmen (We are all Carmen) were prevalent when Aristegui was fired multiple times from her high-rating radio program, including after she co-launched the whistleblower portal, [Méxicoleaks](#).¹⁰ The ongoing popularity of her online radio program further demonstrates her enduring national standing.¹¹ She is also the winner of several prestigious international journalism prizes - most recently, the 2023 [World Press Freedom Hero Award](#).

2 See: <https://ifex.org/faces/carmen-aristegui-fired-up/>

3 PRI was Mexico’s establishment ruling party (in power for 71 years).

4 “Mexican President’s ‘White House’”: <https://aristeguinoticias.com/0911/mexico/mexican-presidents-white-house/>

5 Aristegui was fired from MVS Radio four times; in March 2011, one month after repeating unsubstantiated claims that President Felipe Calderón had a drinking problem; when she refused to read a public apology to the network president on air in 2014, after the Casa Blanca investigation, and on 15 March, after co-launching Mexicoleaks. The final time, she would be off air on national radio for two years.

6 See Chapter 5 Key abuse spike: the investigation into the president’s son’s [chocolate factory](#).

7 “A tool designed to allow government customers to gain remote access to cellphones by tricking targets into clicking links that expose the phone’s operating system”: <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/18/mexican-journalist-carmen-aristegui-slams-government-spyware-targeting-her-teenage-son/>

8 [Doxing](#) 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.

9 See Chapter 6 for further detail.

10 A secure platform focused on exposing corruption. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/16/whistleblowers-mexico-journalists-website>

11 In 2020, the popular digital-native news media Aristegui Noticias was [top rated](#) in the category of native digital media among radio newscasts in Mexico: <https://www.sinembargo.mx/17-04-2020/3769402>

Aristegui told us that the support she receives for her journalism - in Mexico and internationally - allows her to transcend the online violence to which she is subjected on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the virulent threats she receives represent a significant physical risk - especially in a country like Mexico, with its record of structural violence against journalists and women.

A spotlight on the data

This Big Data Case Study examines the campaign of online violence against Carmen Aristegui on the platform formerly known as Twitter in the context of her lived experience of the abuse, her journalistic practice, and the socio-cultural and political conditions in which the abuse occurs.

We adopt a novel mixed method approach applied to an ongoing series of similar case studies¹² involving emblematic targets of gendered online violence in eight countries.

This approach blends automated linguistic and network analysis of over 2 million tweets directed at Aristegui across a four-month period (12 November 2021 to 1 March 2022)¹³ with qualitative contextual research, including long-form interviews with Aristegui, her colleagues at Aristegui Noticias, and civil society experts.¹⁴ It aims to provide a solid evidence base to assess the online violence against Aristegui, synthesizing her self-reported experience with hard data, and situating it within a timeline of events.

KEY FINDINGS

1. **Over half (56%) of the abuse directed at Aristegui on Twitter can be categorized as personal abuse designed to dehumanize her, of which:**
 - **14% was sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit;**
 - **2% was homophobic;**
 - **1% was racist.**
2. **Approximately 43% of all abuse we detected can be classified as professional credibility-based attacks - designed to undermine Aristegui's investigative reporting and critical commentary. This represents a very high rate of abuse designed to damage the professional reputation of a target.**

12 These case studies have been produced by ICFJ Research, in collaboration with computational linguists from the University of Sheffield, since 2021. This is the fifth Big Data Case Study to be published in the series. Others, including Maria Ressa (the Philippines), Carole Cadwalladr (UK), Ghada Oueiss (Lebanon/Qatar) and Rana Ayyub (India), can be found here: <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/online-violence-big-data-case-studies>

13 Of these 2 million tweets, just over 9,000 were sent from one of her two accounts, and the rest were replies, retweets, or mentions her by name.

14 All quotes featured are from seven original interviews conducted for this case study between 11 and 15 March 2022, unless otherwise indicated. The interviewees from Aristegui Noticias are: Carmen Aristegui (founder, radio host, columnist), Laura Barranco (former editorial coordinator, now an environmental activist and journalist, and who previously worked at MVS noticias, Brandon Julien Celaya (community manager); and Gustavo Sánchez (Aristegui's editor). Civil society actors interviewed include Grecia Macías (lawyer with Mexican digital violence NGO R3D); Leopoldo Maldonado (Director, ARTICLE 19 Mexico and Central America; and Priscilla Ruiz (Legal Coordinator of Digital Rights, Article 19 Mexico and Central America).

3. The online harassment and abuse detected against Carmen Aristegui in our dataset is clearly misogynistic. Approximately 8% of all abuse in our dataset could be categorized as sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit abuse. The main tactics used to discredit her focus on her appearance, her sexuality and sexual partners, and the paternity of her son.
4. Spikes in online violence towards Carmen Aristegui evident in our Twitter dataset correlate with attacks on the journalist launched by the current Mexican president in his daily press conferences. In November 2021, one such pile-on led to intense online violence against Aristegui, which continued for a week.
5. A clear objective of the online violence campaigns, triggered in part by the Mexican president's attacks, is to censor Aristegui. One of the most prevalent hashtags in our dataset is #ApagaAristegui (#ShutDownAristegui or #TurnOffAristegui - i.e., censor or turn off her program).
6. Surges in online violence also follow publication of Aristegui's investigative journalism focused on political corruption, her international recognition (e.g., professional awards), and promotion of her daily radio program on social media.
7. The tweets published by @AristeguiOnline are dwarfed by the obviously abusive tweets which are detected at a rate of almost two to one. This is a significantly higher rate than that experienced by most of our other [Big Data Case Study](#) subjects.
8. The online violence that Aristegui experiences occurs in a climate of extreme risk. Mexico is consistently the deadliest country in the world to practice journalism outside of a warzone, and there is a real risk that online threats could escalate to offline attacks.
9. A constant chilling phrase appearing in our tweets is "Por eso los matan" (Translation: "That's why they get killed") - justifying violence against the press and suggesting impunity for crimes against journalists like Aristegui in a country with a 98% impunity rate.
10. While the horrific levels of murder and physical violence against Mexican journalists overshadow concern about online violence, the nexus is clear in Aristegui's case. It reveals a vicious cycle of physical realm attacks (including break-ins and muggings) and digital attacks which expose her and those close to her to increased risk.
11. The online violence experienced by Aristegui radiates to her family and colleagues. For example, she was one of the first journalists in the world to be targeted by the notorious Pegasus spyware and the first known case in which a target's child was also surveilled.

12. There is clear evidence of orchestrated online violence in Aristegui's case. For example, the most prolifically abusive Twitter accounts targeting Aristegui represent a mixture of those with a huge number of followers whose tweets will get widely disseminated very quickly, and others who have very few followers but who tweet voraciously, suggesting bot-like or at least deliberately coordinated abusive behavior.
13. Aristegui is a target of apparently coordinated disinformation campaigns which are frequently highly gendered and designed to damage her professional reputation and her moral standing in a conservative culture. These have included viral reports of her 'assassination' on Twitter and false assertions about romantic relationships. She is also routinely falsely accused of being corrupt, a conservative stooge, a prostitute, a liar and a 'sell out'.
14. Aristegui demonstrates a dogged refusal to be silenced in the face of overt censorship and direct threats.
15. Despite the torrential online violence Aristegui experiences, she also benefits from substantial support among her audiences - expressed both online and offline - who have repeatedly rallied in her defense.



FIGURE 1: *Aristegui accepting her ICFJ-Knight award in 2016.*

Timeline: the evolution of online violence against Carmen Aristegui

2001-2023

2001

- Aristegui wins the National Journalism Prize (Premio Nacional de Periodismo) for Reportage, Feature and Interview awarded by the Citizen Council of the National Journalism Prize, shared with Javier Solórzano for their work at Imagen 90.5 FM (Crónica).¹⁵
- Aristegui hosts the special Political Parties program on Mexican Radio and Television.
- Aristegui hosts afternoon radio news program Imagen Informativa (Informative Image), broadcast by Imagen Radio on 90.5 F.M. and on television channel 108.
- Aristegui co-hosts and directs the analysis and opinion program Círculo Rojo (Red Circle), broadcast on Televisa channel 2, biweekly.

2002

- **KEY EVENT - CENSORED:** Aristegui is prevented from presenting her morning radio show; she and her co-host Javier Solórzano are fired from Grupo Imagen due to editorial conflicts.

¹⁵ Awarded by Consejo Ciudadano del Premio Nacional de Periodismo A.C., an NGO founded in 2001. Aristegui won the prize four times, but in 2001, Aristegui and Solórzano refused the cash prize, in protest at the "stench" of ceremonial favors traded between journalists, the president and society in general.

- Aristegui wins the Mexican Journalist Club Award (Premio del Club de Periodistas de México).
- The Mexican Center for Philanthropy (Cemefi) [recognizes](#) Aristegui for "opening channels of citizen participation, strengthening the role of civil society".

2003

- Aristegui co-presents the prime-time radio program Day by Day (Hoy x Hoy) at W Radio, with Grupo Prisa, and Noticias 52MX.
- [Aristegui Wins](#) the Public Image Prize (Premio de Imagen Pública) for best national communicator from the Colegio de Imagen Pública.

2004

- Aristegui wins National Journalism Prize for Mexico (Premio Nacional de Periodismo) in the [Analysis and Debate](#) section.
- Aristegui is [awarded](#) the inaugural Woman of the Year award (Trofeo a la Mujer) by Mont Blanc, recognized for her role in society.
- Aristegui [is selected](#) as an Olympic torch bearer for "playing an important role in her community via...education and culture...inspiring others and representing the values of the Olympic Games".

2005

In July Aristegui [begins](#) hosting her eponymous prime-time news talk show, Aristegui, on CNN en Español.¹⁶ She also starts a [column](#) for weekly newspaper *Reforma*.

2006

- Felipe Calderón starts a six-term mandate as president.
- Aristegui publishes the book *One of the two. 2006: Mexico at a crossroads* (Uno de dos. 2006: México en la encrucijada) about Felipe Calderón and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the two candidates for the Mexican presidency who both claimed victory amidst allegations of fraud.

16 Aristegui's name came up over the years "in thinking about a Larry King for Latin America, or Larry King for Mexico", say senior management at CNN en Español: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-nov-20-ca-carmen20-story.html>

- Aristegui wins the [Iberoamerican Waves Award 2006](#) (Premio Ondas Iberoamericano), for her 2006 election coverage on Day by Day (Hoy x Hoy) at W Radio.
- Aristegui wins the [Omecíhuatl Award](#) (Medalla Omecíhuatl) from the Women's Institute in Mexico City, for "her open approach to topics not usually covered in society".

2008

- In January, Aristegui's contract at W Radio (Televisa and Grupo Prisa)¹⁷ is not renewed after six years, due to what she calls "editorial discrepancies" with management and "offending powerful interests".¹⁸ Televisa [responds](#) by running an advert denying undue influence. There is also a [protest](#) of around 200-300 people in support of Aristegui.
- In July, Aristegui [wins](#) the Maria Moors Cabot Award (Premio Maria Moors Cabot) for her work as presenter on CNN en Español and columnist in Reforma newspaper Columbia University.

2009

- Aristegui [launches](#) her morning news program Primera Emisión on MVS Radio.
- Aristegui wins a National Journalism Award for her [interview with former president](#) Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado.

2010

- In February, Aristegui's [second book](#) is published, *Transitions: conversations and snapshots of what happened and stopped happening for democracy in Mexico* (Transición : conversaciones y retratos de lo que se hizo y se dejó de hacer por la democracia en México).
- Aristegui [wins](#) the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Award, funded by the University of the Cloister of Sor Juana, for her journalism and the defense of human rights.

17 Grupo Televisa, Mexico's biggest TV network, and Grupo Prisa, Spain's biggest media conglomerate.

18 The LA Times likens this to "as if a combination of Diane Sawyer and Christiane Amanpour had been summarily bounced from the airwaves": <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-jan-19-fg-mexjournalist19-story.html>

2011

- **KEY EVENT - FIRED:** In early February, Aristegui is **fired** from Radio MVS, one month after repeating unsubstantiated claims that President Felipe Calderón had a drinking problem.¹⁹
- **KEY EVENT - REINSTATED:** On 21 February, after two weeks of public outcry, Aristegui is reinstated at MVS Radio; the station admits it was **under pressure from the Mexican administration** amid **uproar** from civil society and public intellectuals.
- **KEY EVENT - FIRED AGAIN:** Aristegui refuses to read a public apology to the network president, Joaquín Vargas, on air; she is fired again.
- Protests follow and Aristegui is reinstated for a second time.



FIGURE 2: Carmen Aristegui in the newsroom. Scene from the 2019 documentary *Radio Silence* by Juliana Fanjul. Credit: Philippe Coeytaux/ Akka Films.

2012

- President Enrique Peña Nieto starts a six-year term, taking over from Felipe Calderón. Peña Nieto will be the subject of an important award-winning investigation by Aristegui and her team.
- Aristegui **publishes a third book** - about one of the worst cases of clergy abuse in the Catholic church in Mexico: *Marcial Maciel: Story of a Criminal* (Marcial Maciel: Historia de un criminal). She **interviews** a woman who had a 25-year relationship with the priest (founder of the Legion of Christ, an influential Catholic order) on MVS Radio. Two of this woman's three sons by the priest tell Aristegui they were sexually abused by him for years, from the age of seven.

¹⁹ Aristegui asks the office of the Mexican president about the alleged alcoholism of President Felipe Calderón (who will soon leave office), and whether it could hinder his work, arguing that the well-being of a president is in the public interest in democracies: <https://ipi.media/ipi-voices-concern-over-mexican-journalists-firing/>

- Aristegui launches Aristegui Noticias, an independent news start-up, and one of Mexico's [top digital news sites](#), which later evolved to host her online radio program.

2013

- Aristegui achieves international recognition with the Caballero de la Orden de la Legión de Honor, bestowed by the government of France.
- Aristegui wins the [John Reed Foundation Award](#) at the Mexico City Congress, for her outstanding work in journalism, and is called "a courageous woman with extraordinary achievements" who has "had to face critical, challenging battles".

2014

- In May, Aristegui and Daniel Lizárraga [create](#) the Special Investigations Unit at MVS, hiring reporters including Irving Huerta, Sebastián Barragán and Rafael Cabrera.
- **KEY EVENT - CASA BLANCA INVESTIGATION PUBLISHED:** Aristegui and her investigations team at Primera Emisión MVS report on the 'Casa Blanca' ('White House') conflict of interest scandal connected to the Mexican presidency. The '[Mexican President's White House](#)' investigation revealed that Angélica Rivera, the First Lady, paid \$7 million (£4.4 million) for a mansion in a wealthy neighborhood of Mexico City, hiring a contractor with close links to her husband Enrique Peña Nieto, the then president of Mexico; the property was owned by a company associated with Mexico's first high-speed rail contract.²⁰
- The Aristegui Noticias team wins the Mexican [National Journalism Award](#) for investigative journalism for the 'White House' story.
- MVS chairman Joaquín Vargas files a lawsuit against Aristegui and Penguin Random House for moral damages.
- **KEY EVENT - FIRED AGAIN:** For the third (and penultimate) time, Aristegui is fired from MVS Radio. A petition with 200,000 signatures protests her dismissal and demands her return, and the hashtag #TodosSomosCarmen (We Are All Carmen) goes viral.

20 Grupo Higa owns the company Ingeniería Inmobiliaria del Centro, in whose name the mansion was registered. The company has links to a Chinese-led consortium which [won](#) a \$3 billion contract to build a high-speed rail link between Mexico City and Queretaro City in central Mexico.

2015

**ONLINE VIOLENCE
BEGINS TO ESCALATE**

- **KEY EVENT - MEXICOLEAKS:** On 10 March, Aristegui co-launches the [Méxicoleaks](#) anti-corruption whistleblowing alliance.²¹ She makes her last appearance as a presenter on MVS Radio from the special investigations unit. On her final show, she condemns the fact that two members of her team²² [have been fired](#) for publicly joining Méxicoleaks, allegedly because they did not have official employer approval. An online petition goes viral, with more than 100,000 signatures in protest at the firings.
- **KEY EVENT - FIRED FOR GOOD:** On 15 March, Aristegui is [fired](#) (for the fourth and final time)²³ from MVS Radio “after publicly supporting...Méxicoleaks”. She will remain off air (on national radio) for two years.
- An anti-censorship protest takes place through a social media campaign, [#MexicoWantsAristeguiBack](#), which becomes a trending topic in Mexico. A [video](#) with high-profile figures also defends the audience’s right to information. On Twitter, hashtags around a variation of “In Defense of Aristegui” ([#EnDefensaDeAristegui](#) [#EnDefensaDeAristegui2](#) [#EnDefensaDeAristegui3](#)) become trending topics [worldwide](#).
- On 14 March, Anonymous [hacks](#) the MVS Media webpage in protest at Aristegui’s dismissal.
- **KEY EVENT - CYBER ATTACK:** In April, the Aristegui Noticias website is subject to a double DDoS attack.
- On 12 May, Aristegui [files](#) a court case asking for protection of her constitutional rights after she was fired by MVS.
- On 14 July, Aristegui [loses](#) her court case against Joaquin Vargas, owner of MVS, in the Mexican Federal Court. She goes on to appeal.
- **KEY EVENT - PEGASUS ATTACK:** In July, Aristegui [receives](#) an infected text message that “Anonymous had announced plans to hack Aristegui’s website”.
- **KEY EVENT - PEGASUS EXTENDED:** In August, Aristegui’s teenage son is also unwittingly [targeted](#) with malicious links via text messages on his phone and infected with the Pegasus spyware for an 18-month period (Aristegui will not find out about this illegal surveillance until June 2017).²⁴

21 Méxicoleaks is a collaborative investigative journalism platform designed to provide a secure method of communication between whistleblowers and journalists: <https://wan-ifra.org/2015/03/sacking-of-top-journalist-connected-to-mexicoleaks-a-tragedy-for-mexican-investigative-reporting/>

22 Journalists Daniel Lizárraga and Irving Huerta.

23 On 16 March 2015, the MVS ombudsman [tweeted](#) that it was a “sad night for journalism and freedom of expression”. Aristegui [said](#): “This team of journalists is decided on fighting the battle for freedom of expression”: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/ultimas_noticias/2015/03/150315_ultnot_mexico_mvs_radio_despide_aristegui_az

24 Aristegui’s son [told](#) The Intercept that one malicious link suggested that the presidency was considering jailing journalists involved in the Mexican White House reporting and others appeared to come from friends asking if he had changed his Facebook and Twitter accounts. He also received a fake message from the U.S. Embassy concerning his visa.

- In October, Aristegui Noticias' Rafael Cabrera, Daniel Lizárraga, Sebastián Barragán, Irving Huerta and Carmen Aristegui [win](#) the Gabriel García Márquez Journalism Award ([Premio Gabo](#)) in the coverage category.
- In November, the team wins the [Latin American Investigative Journalism Prize](#) (2015) for 'Mexican President's White House'.²⁵
- In December, Aristegui writes the prologue for a book by her investigative journalist team, [Peña Nieto's White House](#) (which will lead to her being unsuccessfully sued).

2016

CONTINUED ESCALATION OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

- In May, the investigative team at Aristegui Noticias wins the [ICFJ Knight International Journalism Award](#)²⁶ recognizing quality high-impact reporting on the Mexican White House scandal. The journalists also participated in the Panama Papers investigation, reporting on Mexican figures with massive holdings in overseas tax havens, including the builder of the 'Casa Blanca'.

FIGURE 3: Aristegui gives an interview after winning the ICFJ-Knight Award. Credit: ICFJ



- Also in May, Aristegui and book publisher Penguin are sued by MVS Radio for her prologue to *Peña Nieto's White House* in an attempt to have the book removed from sale. She [describes](#) the legal action as part of "a sustained campaign of harassment and bullying stemming from [her] coverage, plus an attack on freedom of speech."
- In August, Aristegui Noticias published the investigation '[Peña Nieto, from plagiarist to president](#)', which [concluded](#) that 29% of the president's 1991 thesis - *Mexican Presidentialism and Alvaro Obregón* - plagiarized other works. Aristegui and her colleagues were subsequently attacked on social media.
- **KEY EVENT - ORCHESTRATED ONLINE ATTACKS:** In November, Aristegui is targeted in an orchestrated online violence campaign, using the hashtag [#LosSecretosdeAristegui](#) ([#AristeguisSecrets](#)), that accuses her of receiving bribes from Mexican businessman and billionaire, Carlos Slim Helú. It is published by a YouTube account specifically created for that purpose; thousands of bots make it a trending topic.
- **KEY EVENT - NEWSROOM RAID:** Also in November, the Aristegui Noticias office is broken into by five men in the full glare of security

²⁵ A non-profit institution created by Colombian journalist Gabriel García Márquez.

²⁶ Bestowed by the publisher of this study, the International Center for Journalists.

cameras. A laptop is taken from the Research Unit which contains details from an investigation into a PRI political leader and his connections to a prostitution ring.

- **KEY EVENT - DEATH THREATS AND DISINFORMATION:** In the same week as the raid on her newsroom, Aristegui received death threats on social media, according to [ARTICLE 19 Mexico](#). Disinformation is also [disseminated](#) by partisan news websites such as cuando24.com, including falsehoods such as 'news' of a "state-ordered army raid on Aristegui's home".
- **KEY EVENT - ABUSE SPIKE:** On 23 November 2016 Aristegui Noticias denounced the online smear campaign against Carmen Aristegui, criticizing the presence of influencers and bots, as well as threats on Twitter, which they saw as products of an orchestrated defamation campaign.²⁷
- **KEY EVENT - DOXXED:** Aristegui is doxxed after the break-in at her newsroom. Authorities leak her personal information to celebrity gossip magazine TV Notas, which publishes her address and identity number, among other details.
- **KEY EVENT - CASCADING DEATH THREATS:** In December, Aristegui receives [death threats](#) via social media messages, images, and audio recordings.
- Several members of the Aristegui Noticias team resign. An interviewee for this report indicated that the climate of fear and insecurity created by the attacks was a significant contributing factor.

2017

- On 16 January, after two years off air, Aristeguinoticias.com [starts](#) an internet radio program hosted by Aristegui.
- In February, Citizen Lab publishes a [report](#) confirming that Aristegui is [one of eight](#) Mexican journalists targeted by Pegasus, along with her "minor child...targeted while in boarding school in the United States".
- **KEY EVENT - SOCIAL MEDIA 'ASSASSINATION':** In early March, a [false report](#) goes viral on social media - coursing across Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp - about the "murder" of Aristegui, intimidating her in a climate of confusion and fear.
- In June, a [report](#)²⁸ on the Pegasus attacks reveals that of 180 journalists, Carmen Aristegui, her son and fellow investigative journalists Rafael Cabrera and Sebastián Barragán, as well as human rights defenders, have been subjected to digital surveillance by Pegasus spyware bought by the Mexican government.

²⁷ The University of Oxford published a report about digital news consumption in 2019 that highlighted the hazard of "bots and trolls spreading false stories through social media" in Mexico: <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/mexico-2019/>

²⁸ Published by ARTICLE 19 Mexico, NGOs R3D, SocialTIC, and Citizen Lab, using the hashtag #GobiernoEspía (#SpyGovernment).

- **KEY EVENT - HITTING BACK:** Aristegui and eight others - fellow journalists, anti-corruption activists and lawyers - file a [criminal complaint](#) about the Pegasus attacks with the Mexican Attorney General's Office. They also request that the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) act to protect them. While this human rights institution exists as a mechanism to help human rights defenders and journalists at risk of attack, "in practice...the commission is entirely subservient to the government," [according](#) to historian Enrique Krauze.²⁹

2018

- Aristegui becomes [president](#) of the Javier Valdez Cárdenas Award (named after a journalist [murdered](#) in 2017) at Penguin Random House.
- On 17 October, Aristegui [returns](#) to national radio supported by Grupo Radio Centro. It becomes one of the most listened-to radio programs in Mexico, cementing Aristegui's reputation as an opinion leader.
- December: President Andrés Manuel López Obrador starts a six-year term, taking over from Enrique Peña Nieto.

2019

February: The National Supreme Court of Justice issues a [ruling](#) in favor of Aristegui and her team, which protects their right to freedom of expression with regard to the prologue of the book by her colleagues Daniel Lizárraga, Irving Huerta, Sebastián Barragán and Rafael Cabrera. It also confirms that her dismissal from MVS was illegal.

2020

- **KEY EVENT - ONLINE ATTACK NETWORK:** Aristegui Noticias publishes an investigation carried out with data analysts [Signa_Lab](#) and ARTICLE 19 Mexico on online attacks linked to Sanjuana Martínez, the director of Mexican state news agency Notimex, showing that she is using fake Twitter accounts to attack co-workers and journalists, including Aristegui.
- **KEY EVENT - STATE-LINKED ONLINE ATTACKS:** Aristegui is subjected to online attacks by State-aligned bots and social media users, who seed trending narratives on social media featuring sexist and deeply personalized abuse.

////////////////////

²⁹ See also the critical report of the UN Special Rapporteur following a formal country visit in 2017: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2017/01/end-mission-statement-unit-ed-nations-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights>

- Aristegui is targeted with the trending hashtag #ApagaAristegui (#TurnOffAristegui), designed to alienate her audiences³⁰ after she publishes an article about [illegal online targeting of journalists](#) by the network connected to Notimex.³¹

2021

ABUSE SPIKES APPEAR IN OUR DATA

- KEY EVENT - THE PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCE AS ABUSE TRIGGER:** In June, Aristegui questions the president's new morning press conference section "Quién es quién en las mentiras" ("Who's who of the liars"), which purports to tackle 'fake news,' but in reality becomes a vehicle to attack the press and individual journalists. In response to her critique, Aristegui receives online abuse with the hashtag #despropósito (#absurdity, #preposterous).
- KEY EVENT - THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY:** On 28 November 2021, Aristegui Noticias and the political magazine *Proceso* publish an investigation called '[Sowing Life and the Chocolate Factory](#).' This refers to the government's flagship environmental project Sembrando Vida (Sowing Life), [amid accusations](#) of "financial irregularities" associated with its role in cocoa production and nepotism linked with José Ramón López Beltrán (President López Obrador's son) and his chocolate business.
- KEY ABUSE SPIKE:** On 29 November Aristegui is derided by the Mexican president during his morning conference, who denies that his son is connected to Sowing Life and accuses Aristegui Noticias and *Proceso* of "seeking to stain us with the maxim of journalism's underworld that slanders." [Intense online violence](#) follows, lasting a week. We see this abuse spike in our Twitter data.
- KEY ABUSE SPIKE:** As a result of the chocolate factory investigation being republished by Latin America-wide news portal CONNECTAS, the [president](#) again [seeks to discredit](#) Aristegui Noticias' reporting, and we see an associated spike in the online violence against her in our Twitter dataset, including abuse connected with the [#ChocolatesRocío](#)³² hashtag.
- Aristegui becomes [jury president](#) of Mexico's [Walter Reuter German Journalism Award](#).

30 We saw similar tactics deployed against journalist Maria Ressa and her digital media Rappler in the Philippines in 2017, with the viral hashtag #UnfollowRappler.

31 In late October, 2023, just as this report was being finalized, President López Obrador moved to "extinguish and liquidate" the Mexican State News Agency (Notimex), "considering that the diversity of sources that provide information in real time 'evidence that a state information agency can be dispensed with.'" See: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/noticia/2023/10/17/politica/amlo-envia-a-san-lazaro-iniciativa-para-extinguir-y-liquidar-notimex-6393>

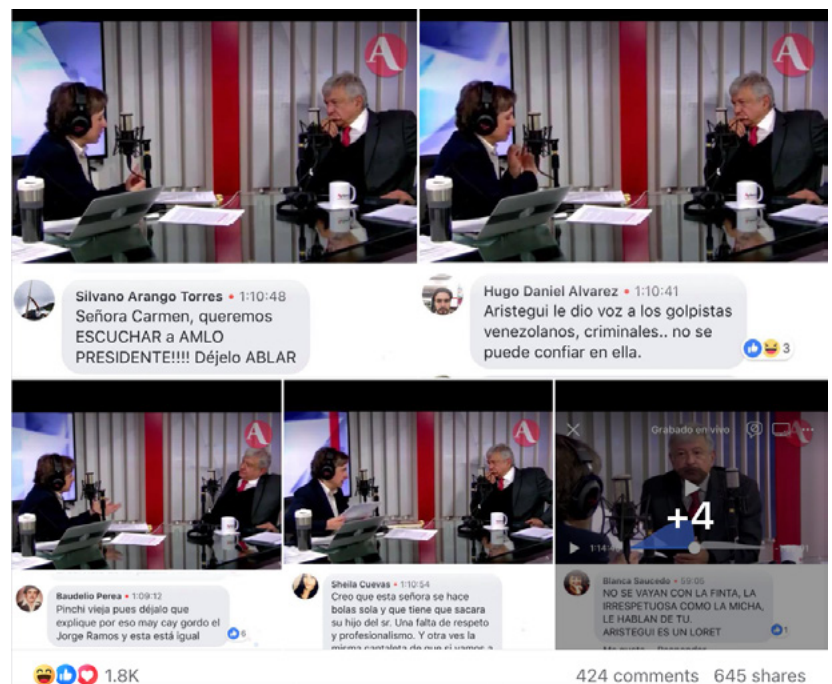
32 "[Rocío Chocolate](#)" is a chocolate store in Mexico City, part of the presidential family-owned chocolate making company in the state of Tabasco.

2022

- **KEY ABUSE SPIKE:** On 28 January, Aristegui broadcasts 'The luxury life of AMLO's son', a story first reported by the organizations [Mexicans Against Corruption](#) and [Latinus](#) media. In Texas, the president's eldest son, José Ramón López Beltrán, was renting million-dollar luxury homes from an oil company executive who had a contract with the Mexican government. In response, President López Obrador again seeks to discredit Aristegui during his morning press conference, and she becomes a trending topic on Mexican Twitter.
- In February, Aristegui [responds](#) to the attacks: "The President used his political power and resources to attack a journalist, it is pitiful that he uses them to destroy reputations, that he has decided to cause harm". In retaliation, Aristegui is further attacked by President López Obrador during the subsequent morning press conference.
- **KEY ABUSE SPIKE:** In March, Aristegui is attacked on Twitter in what she says felt like a "digital lynching". Her abusers accuse her of being "chayotera" (on the take), a "traidora" (traitor), and a "vendida" (sell out). The hashtags #Chayistegui and #Chairistegui - "chairo" or "chaira" being slang terms used derogatorily to refer to 'lefties', trend online.

FIGURE 4: In November 2018, an account which often targeted Aristegui on Facebook [posted](#) collated screenshots of comments taken from a video interview of Aristegui with President López Obrador. These comments demand she stop speaking and let the president speak. They accuse her of giving voice to Venezuelan coup plotters, and criminals asserting that she can't be trusted. They also target her age; accuse her of lacking respect and professionalism; call her a 'Loret'.³³

- Aristegui joins the [Gabo Foundation's](#) board in June. A former Gabo Award winner, she [comments](#) on how important journalists are for democracies and a better informed public - especially when they are commonly discredited and/or silenced in Mexico.



33 See Chapter 5 for more context about former journalist Carlos Loret de Mola who has exposed alleged corruption in the family and government of President López Obrador.

- In December, Aristegui wins the Association of European Journalists' [XIX Diario Madrid Prize in Spain](#) for "both the exercise of the profession and in her permanent defense of civil liberties in Mexico, a country in which it is difficult to exercise journalism, the cornerstone of democracy". The award is named after a newspaper closed during the Franco dictatorship in Spain.
- Aristegui [wins](#) the National Journalism Award (Premio Nacional de Periodismo), as part of a collaboration with CONNECTAS and POPLab.

2023

- In April, Aristegui is named 2023 [World Press Freedom Hero](#) by the International Press Institute and International Media Support (IPI-IMS), for her "decades of fearless reporting on corruption in Mexico, regardless of the government in power, and her unyielding commitment to critical journalism in the face of targeted efforts to silence her."³⁴ The [award](#) was previously won by exiled Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho Ribeira (2010),³⁵ and Jesús Blancornelas (2001).
- In September, the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) [awarded](#) Aristegui the Grand Prize for Press Freedom 2023 for her [commitment](#) to freedom of expression in Mexico.

34 Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui named 2023 IPI-IMS World Press Freedom Hero, IPI: <https://ipi.media/mexican-journalist-carmen-aristegui-named-2023-ipi-ims-world-press-freedom-hero/>

35 Mexican investigative reporter Lydia Cacho has been living in exile since 2019, after her dogs were killed in a hired gunman or "sicario" raid on her home and seven death threats. She is known for her investigative reporting that uncovered a paedophile ring run by powerful businessmen. She was also kidnapped and tortured by Mexican state police.

3

METHODOLOGY



This novel [Big Data Case Study](#) blends qualitative interviews and situational research with large scale social media analysis to deliver a textured study of the online violence experienced by Carmen Aristegui on the platform formally known as Twitter.

We deployed automated linguistic and network analysis to examine over 2.3 million tweets across a four-month period (12 November 2021 to 1 March 2022) and conducted seven long-form interviews with Aristegui, her colleagues at Aristegui Noticias, and civil society experts,³⁶ alongside deep contextual research. All quotes featured are derived from the original interviews (completed in 2022) unless otherwise indicated.

Aristegui does not use social media platforms heavily herself - her social media accounts are routinely managed by her teams, with posts published by her signed 'CA'. But Aristegui is nevertheless targeted in online violence campaigns, with significant associated risk.³⁷

³⁶ The interviewees are: Carmen Aristegui (founder, radio host, columnist), Laura Barranco (former Aristegui Noticias editorial coordinator), Brandon Julien Celaya (community manager); and Gustavo Sánchez (Aristegui's former editor). Civil society actors interviewed include Grecia Macías (lawyer with Mexican digital violence NGO R3D); Leopoldo Maldonado (Director, ARTICLE 19 Mexico and Central America); and Priscilla Ruiz, (Legal Coordinator of Digital Rights, Article 19 Mexico and Central America).

³⁷ We see similar patterns in the cases of Daphne Caruana Galizia (the subject of our ongoing posthumous case study) who was brutally attacked online ahead of her 2017 assassination despite not actually having any social media accounts, and [Ghada Oueiss](#), who was routinely attacked on social media for years before she opened her first account.

**2,300,000
TWEETS
WERE ANALYZED**

**COLLECTED BETWEEN
12 NOVEMBER 2021 AND 1 MARCH 2022**

Aristegui told us that Twitter and YouTube were the main vectors for the online violence she experiences. Relevantly, current Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador hosts his morning conferences on television and across the social web³⁸ and they regularly feature attacks on journalists, including Aristegui, that echo across mainstream media and intensify on social media (especially Twitter), contributing to an enabling environment for attacks on journalists in Mexico.

We chose Twitter (since re-branded X), regarded as the most popular platform with Mexican journalists,³⁹ as the platform to study in detail in Aristegui's case.

The tweets collected relate to two influential Twitter accounts bearing Aristegui's name: her account at CNN Mexico @AristeguiCNN (7.4 million followers) and her Aristegui Noticias account @AristeguiOnline (9.2 million followers). In total, these two collections comprise 2,304,126 tweets, of which 637,980 are related to Aristegui's CNN account and 1,666,146 to her Aristegui Noticias account. After disregarding the tweets published by these accounts from our dataset, we were left with two million tweets directed at Aristegui's accounts for the purpose of deeper analysis. During the time period of our study, it became clear that Aristegui's CNN account was used much less, and also received much less abuse. As a result, we restrict our in-depth analysis of the Twitter data to her @AristeguiOnline account.

We developed an abuse classifier for Mexican Spanish to automatically detect obviously abusive tweets, with some limitations: threats and abuse which are more subtle are not identified; we focus on tweets where the abuse is clearly directed at Aristegui. It does, however, include recognition of Mexican street slang.⁴⁰ Technical limitations mean that the statistics relating to abusive tweets should be taken as a guide rather than as absolute since we err on the side of caution with detection. Based on our experiments with test data we estimate that our tools miss around 50% of actual abuse, given that it is not always easy to detect.⁴¹

In line with academic research ethics protocols, we have obscured the identities of social media users featured in the Twitter data collected for our NLP analysis, unless they are public figures.

38 See Chapter 5 "The president's morning conference" for further details.

39 See Corona and Muñoz's (2018) [paper](https://burjc-digital.urjc.es/handle/10115/16853) on activity and involvement around the Twitter accounts of journalists and newscasters on national television in Mexico: <https://burjc-digital.urjc.es/handle/10115/16853>

40 For example, the Mexican slang word "chingada" appears over 1,000 times in our dataset. Derived from the verb chingar, "to fuck", it has a variety of negative, offensive and/or crass meanings such as "whore", "shit", "fuck", depending on the context. We worked with a regional linguist to help identify these terms.

41 See Chapter 5 "Detailed Analysis of our Twitter Dataset" for more information.

4

THE CONTEXT



Before analyzing our Twitter dataset in detail, it is important to understand the context for the brutal online violence against Aristegui as it has evolved over time, and escalated through targeted surveillance, and pile-ons fueled by President López Obrador. In this section, we identify the primary socio-political and cultural factors that inform our data interpretation, and we explore the origins of online violence campaigns targeting Aristegui.

4.1 A dangerous country for journalists

As earlier noted, outside of active conflict zones, Mexico is the **deadliest country** in the world to practice journalism⁴² and it has the **highest rate of impunity** for crimes against journalists. Since 2000, **157 journalists have been assassinated**,⁴³ with 13 killed in 2022 alone.⁴⁴ Media workers covering hard news often face threats, kidnapping and physical violence. According to the freedom of expression NGO Article 19, violence against journalists has **risen by 85%** since President López Obrador took office in December 2018. To date, 37 journalists have been killed during his presidency, with an attack on the press being recorded **every 13 hours**.

The rate of **impunity for crimes against journalists in Mexico is also staggeringly high, registering at 97.9%**, with most such crimes going unpunished due to a lack of proper investigation. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHCR) has called on the authorities to take urgent action and additional measures to protect journalists and aid the fight against impunity.

The risk of online violence developing into offline attacks is significant in such a treacherous country for journalists - especially one as high-impact and visible as Carmen Aristegui. According to Grecia Macías, a lawyer with the Mexican digital violence NGO R3D, "direct incitement" to commit a "crime" on social media platforms is a red flag that might trigger physical violence.

"We have seen that when a group of people are organizing to go somewhere, to bring X or Y material, to commit abuse towards feminists for example, these are important alerts."

A special law to protect human rights defenders and journalists was created in June 2012.⁴⁵ The government also established the Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, a facility that theoretically offers protective measures for more than 4,000 journalists at risk. However, a lack of political will is often cited as an impediment for the effective implementation of these laws and mechanisms.⁴⁶ This is a problem exacerbated in a climate of digitally facilitated gender-based violence.

42 The UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists records the killing of 157 journalists in Mexico since 1993 - second only to Iraq. See: <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory?hub=72609>

43 <https://articulo19.org/periodistasasesinados/>

44 They **include** Yesenia Mollinedo Falconi, director of an online news outlet called El Veraz (The Truthful One) and reporter Sheila Johana García Olivera (Veracruz). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) 2022, 13 is the highest number of journalist murders in Mexico in a single year since it started keeping records in 1992: <https://cpj.org/reports/2023/01/deadly-year-for-journalists-as-killings-rose-sharply-in-2022/>

45 "Ley para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas".

46 In 2019 Mexican journalist Lourdes Maldonado - who was 'protected' by this Mechanism for reporting on corruption and politics - told President López Obrador at his daily morning news briefing: "I need your support to achieve justice, because I fear for my life". In January 2022, Maldonado was shot in her car as she arrived home in the northern border city of Tijuana, Baja California. Her murder sparked protests all over the country. Three hitmen were detained.

Gendered anti-press violence

Three main perpetrator groups are engaged in anti-press violence in Mexico: organized crime, armed forces, and the State - a pattern frequently reflected online. However, female journalists are faced with an additional layer of attackers: misogynists operating in a country which experiences endemic violence against women. Therefore, female Mexican journalists face increased threats when doing their job, underscored by a high rate of femicide.⁴⁷ In 2022, the civil society organization CIMAC (Women's Communication and Information Center) registered 1,327 online and offline attacks on female journalists, 612 cases of institutional violence, and 20 femicides.⁴⁸ The vast majority of these were concentrated in the capital, Mexico City, Veracruz in the east, and the State of Mexico.

An analysis taking account of the potential of physical violence behind the online threats against women journalists cannot ignore the fact that Mexico has a very high rate of crimes against women in general. Femicides are increasingly covered in the news: they occur at the rate of **ten per day**⁴⁹ in the country. From 2019-2022, well over 900 women were killed per year, and 572 femicides had already been recorded in the first eight months of 2023, according to the Interior Ministry's **Executive Secretariat of the National Security Ministry**. The same report states that 70% of women over the age of 15 have suffered from violence, corroborated by a 2017 report by feminist digital rights group Luchadoras Mexico⁵⁰ stating that 66% of women over 15 had experienced **some form of violence** at school, at work, or in their community, family or relationship.

The silent phenomenon

ARTICLE 19's Legal Coordinator in Mexico Priscilla Ruiz told us that digital violence towards journalists is a silent phenomenon in the country due to **fear of potentially deadly physical violence** which overshadows digital threats. Nevertheless, in 2021, ARTICLE 19 **pointed out** that digital violence in Mexico had increased, especially connected to topics related to femicide and gender.⁵¹

Female journalists are typically criticized for their appearance, their sexuality, and their marital status in Mexico. If the journalist does not have a partner, social censure follows and disinformation narratives about the partner proliferate. In Aristegui's case, her status as a single mother is also highlighted.⁵² All these identities are attacked in parallel with a female journalist's professional practice.

Twitter (now X) is the platform where most of the online violence towards women journalists is found in Mexico, followed by Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp.⁵³ Other vehicles for digital threats and hateful abuse include email, and phone calls. Among the modes of attack are anonymous threats, misogynistic slurs, doxxing, orchestrated trolling, stalking, sexual harassment, and censorship (e.g., platform content removal, mainly on Twitter). Mexican NGOs, such as Ciberseguras (Cyber secure women) and

47 Women murdered because of their gender; see: <https://fundacion-rama.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/3697-Feminicidio-una-perspectiva-%E2%80%A6Rus-sell-y-Harmes.pdf>

48 CIMAC (2022), Cartografía de la violencia contra las periodistas (Cartography of violence against female journalists), see: <https://cartografia-cimac.uwazi.io/>

49 Official Interior Ministry government report on violence against women, 2023: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gh15U5y0t9jnnQ3hsNEclF3iHm1JW-Km/view>

50 Luchadoras Mexico (2017) report on "Online Violence Against Women in Mexico": https://luchadoras.mx/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Informe_ViolenciaEnLineaMexico_Inter-netEsNuestra.pdf

51 ARTICLE 19. (2021) Distortion: The discourse against reality, Annual report 2020: <https://articulo19.org/distorsion/>

52 An LA Times article about Aristegui becoming a prime-time CNN host also refers to the Mexican view of Aristegui as a single mother: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-nov-20-ca-carmen20-story.html>

53 See Cuéllar and Chaheer (2020): **Being a Journalist on Twitter: Digital Gender Violence in Latin America**

R3D (Red en Defensa de los Derechos Digitales or Network in Defense of Digital Rights) [help](#) women journalists to protect themselves digitally, reporting online violence and systematically analyzing it.

In addition to the complex web of threats facing Mexico's female journalists outlined above, many are also economically vulnerable. Because of the insecurity and violence in the country, the climate of political tension, and the absence of effective public policy that protects journalists and tackles precarity, many journalists in Mexico lack a formal employment contract and health insurance, put in excessive work hours, and need to have multiple freelance assignments to survive.

4.2 The escalation of online violence against Carmen Aristegui

In this section we analyze the evolution of online violence against Aristegui through a series of mini case studies focused on triggers for identified abuse spikes connected to her investigations, prior to the commencement of our Twitter data collection in November 2021.

4.2.1 Lightning rods for abuse: The 'White House' and the whistleblowers

Aristegui founded [Aristegui Noticias](#) in 2012, after being fired by Radio MVS (for the first time) the previous year for reporting critically on a former president.⁵⁴ The establishment of Aristegui's eponymous news outlet coincided with the start of former Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto's first term, and it was followed by a series of offline aggressions linked to surges in online violence.

In 2014, Carmen Aristegui, and her team of investigative journalists⁵⁵ broke the '[Casa Blanca](#)' (White House) [real estate corruption scandal](#). President Peña Nieto and first lady Angélica Rivera's [USD \\$7 million dollar property](#) was revealed to be [in the name of a government contractor](#), who had received other significant contracts during Peña Nieto's presidency. The investigation went on to expose a nepotistic network of politicians and contractors.⁵⁶ Aristegui was fired from MVS in the context of government pressure, but she was later reinstated.

The following year, Aristegui co-founded the collaborative whistleblower platform [Méxicoleaks](#), designed to strengthen investigative journalism in Mexico and protect confidential sources. This was a development which [alarmed political powerbrokers](#) in the country. Retaliatory attempts to censor and silence Aristegui and her outlet followed.

54 See timeline (Chapter 2) for further details.

55 Rafael Cabrera, Sebastián Barragán, Irving Huerta and Daniel Lizárraga.

56 The investigation later showed that not only had the then-finance minister also purchased a house from the contractor, but the president had been using another home from the same group, rent-free: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/mexico-president-apologizes-luxury-home-contractor>

In March 2015, Aristegui and two members of her 'White House' investigation team were (for the final time) fired from Noticias MVS, where she hosted one of the country's most popular radio newscasts. Officially, the justification for their dismissal was their involvement with [Méxicoleaks](#) without formal approval. Unofficially, they were fired for their critical reporting on the Mexican government and the president which was perceived to present a risk of "harm" to international trade.



FIGURE 5: 'Mexican President's White House' Credit: Aristegui Noticias, and [Méxicoleaks](#) which Aristegui co-launched in March 2015. Credit: Screenshot MexicoLeaks.mx.



In response, there was an outpouring of public support for Aristegui. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): "Social media sites exploded with posts outraged at Aristegui's dismissal, and the hashtags [#EnDefensadeAristegui](#) [[#InDefenseofAristegui](#)] and [#EnDefensadeAristegui2](#) [[#InDefenseofAristegui2](#)] trended on Twitter."

Pictures posted to Twitter showed supporters placing "[chayotes](#)" (gourds) outside the MVS radio station. "Chayo" is Mexican slang for money paid by politicians to reporters in exchange for positive stories.

But this marks a turning point in our timeline. By the end of 2015, Aristegui and her outlet had become the targets of sypware and digital security attacks (see discussion below) and the function of the social web as a defensive flank for Aristegui began to be neutralized by bad actors.

Note: President Nieto finally [apologized](#) for the 'White House' scandal in 2016,⁵⁷ while the Aristegui Noticias investigation was recognized with the prestigious National Journalism Prize in 2015 and the ICFJ Knight International Journalism Award in 2016.⁵⁸

4.2.2 Online-offline trajectory: Death threats, a fake murder, and a brazen newsroom break-in

The week before she was awarded the 2016 ICFJ Knight Award for International Journalism in Washington DC for the 'White House' investigation, Carmen Aristegui experienced a spike in online violence, including targeted disinformation. As Mexican political magazine [Proceso](#) reported: "...attacks and rumors intensified on social networks on some digital sites that specialize in disseminating 'dirty information'.. These rumors indicated, for example, that the army had raided Aristegui's home by government order."

57 See: "The mansion...was returned to Grupo Higa and the company returned the money paid... Since then, the mansion been unoccupied": <https://expansion.mx/opinion/2019/02/09/pena-nieto-y-angelica-rivera-el-fin-de-la-telenovela> and "Mexico's president apologized for a corruption scandal. But the nightmare goes on for the reporter who uncovered it": <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/22/mexicos-president-apologized-for-a-corruption-scandal-but-the-nightmare-goes-on-for-the-reporter-who-uncovered-it/>

58 Bestowed by the organization publishing this Big Data Case Study, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).

In addition to false claims of a military raid on Aristegui's home which first surfaced on 11 November, the hashtag #LosSecretosDeAristegui (#TheAristeguiSecrets) became a top 10 national trend on Twitter for five hours on 13 November, the day before the ICFJ Knight Award ceremony. It referred to an influencer and YouTuber who had [falsely claimed](#) that Aristegui was romantically involved with Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim Helú and reflected the gendered nature of much of the disinformation targeting Aristegui in the context of online violence attacks.

FIGURE 6: "Carlos Slim and Carmen Aristegui: the next presidential couple (the best kept secret in Mexico)". A [Facebook video post](#) labelled "advert" from an account by influencer and YouTuber "Callodehacha". Credit: Screenshot from [Aristegui Noticias](#).

Later that day, there was a break-in at Aristegui Noticias' newsroom. Five unidentified people raided the office on a Sunday afternoon, stealing a laptop that was central to a political corruption investigation, signalling a clear physical threat. Aristegui described the break-in to us as an act of intimidation from the top, perpetrated brazenly considering the presence of nine security cameras:

The people who raided our offices...didn't care. They turned to the cameras as if to say 'Hello', and with their faces uncovered too...They were here for nearly five hours, they overcame the security guard, they stole a computer, like simple thieves, but there was a lot more equipment they could easily have taken... The purpose... was to intimidate. It was a terrible message saying 'We can come in when we like, because we did, and we can again'. It was a shock for the team seeing the camera footage...how they broke down the door to get into the studio. The way they...turned everything upside down, the way they got to the special investigations area and took that specific computer.

It is important to connect the dots between the timing of the break-in, the viral smear campaign (which involved trending disinformation narratives over a five hour period overlapping with the break-in), and the international spotlight on Aristegui Noticias' investigative journalism which was drawing attention to the climate of impunity for journalist killings and censorship in Mexico. "The following day I was going to receive an award in Washington for our journalism; paradoxically, in Mexico we were punished so severely, while in other parts of the world we were given awards for our work on the Casa Blanca ('White House')," Aristegui told us.

After the break-in, Aristegui was doxxed when her personal details - including her address and identity number - were [leaked by the authorities](#) to entertainment magazine TV Notas. [Threats](#) via social media messages, images, and audio recordings followed. "The sanction - the punishment of the journalists who carried out the White House investigation in Mexico - was brutal", she told us.



FIGURE 7: The hashtag #LosSecretos deAristegui (#TheAristeguiSecrets) trended in 2016. Credit: Screenshots from a [2016 Aristegui Noticias](#) article.

A mock assassination

A week after the Aristegui Noticias newsroom break-in and the ICFJ-Knight award ceremony, Carmen Aristegui received a series of death threats across multiple social media platforms, including this [chilling example on Twitter](#):

FIGURE 8: Translation: "Read with attention 'Miss Carmen' we have what we want now and we don't need you anymore" - the handwritten image attached, surrounded with five bullets, reads: "You are going to hell/die Carmen". Credit: Screenshot from a 2016 Aristegui Noticias article.



Shockingly, Aristegui told us that she experiences death threats as commonplace:

Death threats from social media, threats to physically harm you... that fortunately has not come to bear, but that create quite the disturbing environment ... There's... darkness there... anonymity can give you bots, automation - mechanisms that speed up messages that bombard a person.

In such a climate of impunity for digital threats against female journalists in Mexico, perhaps the mock assassination of Carmen Aristegui on social media should not come as a shock. In March 2017, a fake report of Aristegui's "murder" began circulating on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. The disinformation went viral with the help of bots and trolls, with one tweet amplified by an account purporting to belong to the former prime time TV presenter Joaquín López Dóriga (see Figure 9). "My condolences to Carmen Aristegui's family, who was assassinated this morning in a cowardly act," the tweet read. However, Dóriga claimed that the [tweet in question was fake](#) and the work of an imposter who was [targeting him](#) as well.



FIGURE 9: [Quote tweet](#) from an account with over 37,000 followers saying "@lopezdoriga assassinates Carmen Aristegui! We saw that coming! The fight for #Chayote of @EPN is ON!". He shares a tweet - purportedly from TV presenter Joaquín López Dóriga - which says: "My condolences to Carmen Aristegui's family, who was assassinated this morning in a cowardly act". Screenshot from Twitter.

Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho⁵⁹ [investigated](#) the mock assassination of Aristegui finding that it was linked to the opposition PAN (right-wing political party) and connected to a website known to generate fake news. The clear purpose was to intimidate, generate confusion, and spread fear.

FIGURE 10: A graphic illustration of of Aristegui's 'assassination' attached to a tweet which read: "#UseTwitterAndYoullFind that after being lynched, Carmen Aristegui is casually #assassinated on #SocialMedia". The text on the graphic reads "Latest News: Rest in Peace (RIP) Carmen Aristegui 1964 - 2017"; the account was suspended at the time of writing. Credit: Screenshot from [Libera Radio](#).



Lydia Cacho was able to track the account linked to one viral tweet (see Figure 11) back to a resident of Tijuana, Baja California, and a company in San Diego

59 See 2023 in the timeline in Chapter 2 for more detail on Cacho's case.

working as consultants to political parties. Further [investigation](#) linked high-profile figures (such as a Mexican economist and entrepreneur) to other paid disinformation, “killing” prominent Mexicans who were still alive.

FIGURE 11: A tweet from a bot account which periodically resent the tweet with [false news](#) of Aristegui’s ‘assassination’ in 2017: “Breaking news! Carmen Aristegui dies, in an act of cowardice she was shot by an armed commando. SHARE BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT DELETES IT”⁶⁰ The false assassination announcement also appeared on a fake news website called [www.elpoderdelsaber](#).



Online violence as a ‘lawfare’ enabler

As we have found in multiple emblematic [Big Data Case Studies](#), including those focused on Nobel Laureate Maria Ressa, British investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr, and India’s Rana Ayyub, the online violence directed at Carmen Aristegui creates an enabling environment for ‘lawfare’.

In May 2016, Aristegui and publisher Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial were sued by the late MVS Comunicaciones chairman, Joaquín Vargas, for moral damages in response to the prologue Aristegui wrote for a book, [Peña Nieto’s White House](#). A judge initially found for Vargas and, inexplicably, accused Aristegui of “excessive use” of freedom of expression and the right to information.⁶¹ However, Aristegui appealed to the Mexican Supreme Court and won.⁶²

In 2018 she [told IJnet](#) about her experience of judicial harassment:

I have to continue fighting in the courts about my defense of the right to express my ideas and to inform Mexican society. It is incredible that a journalist has to spend a large part of her time, her energy and her state of mind defending herself in court for acts of censorship. It is an anomalous situation for democracy.

As Aristegui stated in her [acceptance speech](#) for the 2016 ICFJ Knight Journalism Award for the ‘[White House](#)’ story:

In many parts of Mexico, an inconvenient journalist can be silenced - even murdered - and almost nothing will happen. If the journalist has a certain public presence, he or she can be prosecuted with lawsuits whose goal is not to obtain justice, but rather to take revenge for what we print. I’m afraid that is my case.

⁶⁰ Although the screen grab used here has been anonymized, Cacho revealed the account as @vooltrakkar (since deleted).

⁶¹ Fifty-seventh civil judge on October 28, 2016.

⁶² The Court [found](#) that the collegiate tribunal’s [decision](#) requiring the journalist “to prove the statements in the prologue of a book were true” was “not consistent with standards on freedom of expression”. The Court also ordered the tribunal: “to apply the standard of actual malice”; “to analyze if the opinions disseminated have sufficient factual basis”; and to “take into account that the businessman alleging the harm...must bear the burden of proof...and that they effectively caused the harm that is being invoked”.

4.2.3 Surveilled and hacked: the Pegasus scandal & the targeting of Aristegui's son

Why did Peña Nieto's government want to know about my son, about his activities, the friends of a teenage boy, his photos in real time? ...That is Pegasus, which is sinister, and it's even more sinister if it is utilized against a teenager. Carmen Aristegui

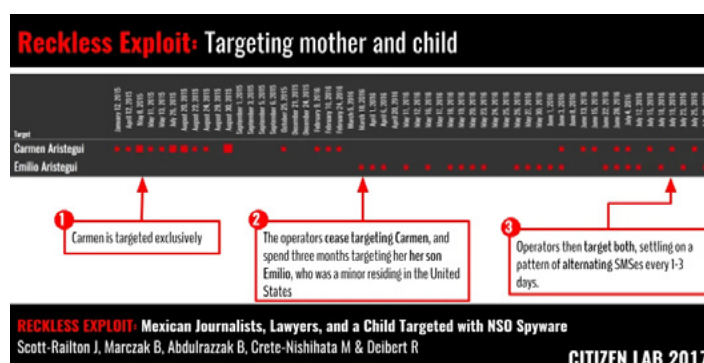
Carmen Aristegui is one of the first known journalists to have been targeted by the notorious military-grade Pegasus spyware - an act of online violence, [as we define it](#).

From 2015 to 2017 Aristegui and her son Emilio (a minor at the time) were [exposed to malware](#) attacks using Pegasus spyware,⁶³ sold by the Israeli NSO Group to international governments, including Mexico's. [Citizen Lab](#), based at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, and the digital rights group R3D, have described how extractive and sophisticated the cyberweapon was, even when switched off: "It begins with a text message sent to a potential victim. The phone becomes a pocket spy: the phone's camera, the microphone, text messages, and anything else done on the phone or close to it, are susceptible to monitoring".

In 2017, Mexican NGOs ARTICLE 19 Mexico, R3D and SocialTIC, worked with Citizen Lab to conduct a scientific data analysis of 76 attacks using Pegasus spyware acquired by the Mexican Government, with targets including Carmen Aristegui and her son, then a minor, along with members of Aristegui's team of investigative reporters.⁶⁴ The report [#GobiernoEspía](#) (GovernmentSpy) showed that there had been a systematic campaign of surveillance of journalists and human rights defenders in Mexico. The *New York Times* [reported the attacks](#) on the front page, under the headline: "Using texts as lures, government spyware targets Mexican journalists and their families". Additionally, national media outlets [Milenio](#) (print) and Televisa (cable) released the contract through which the PGR Attorney General's Office acquired Pegasus for \$32 million pesos (USD \$1.5 million).

We know from previous research that online violence [radiates to family members](#), but this is the only documented case involving the deployment of Pegasus spyware against the child of a target. This is a perspective shared by Leopoldo Maldonado, Director of ARTICLE 19 in Mexico and Central America, who represents Aristegui and others who have been victims of spyware attacks.

FIGURE 12: *Pegasus spyware attacks on the Aristeguis - mother and son. Credit: Citizen Lab 2017.*



⁶³ In the 2019 documentary [Radio Silence](#), Aristegui comments on the "great degree of perversity" of her teenage son, then a student abroad, being targeted on his iPhone with malware that she says both of them clicked on many times.

⁶⁴ Rafael Cabrera and Sebastián Barragán were also targeted by Pegasus: <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/18/mexican-journalist-carmen-aristegui-slams-government-spyware-targeting-her-teenage-son/>

Aristegui joined a group of journalists and several NGOs in [filing a lawsuit](#) with the Mexican Attorney General's Office over the Pegasus attacks in 2017. They also requested precautionary measures from the National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH). Although Aristegui Noticias' investigations found that the spyware had been used by national institutions such as the Mexican Army, the extinct National Security and Research Center (CISEN), and Mexican state governments, there was considerable resistance to releasing data pertaining to public officers. The case floundered in the hands of the Attorney General of the Republic (PGR), and so far only one person has been [arrested](#) in connection with the attacks, in November 2021.

The international community appealed to Mexico to pursue the investigation, with United Nations experts [asking](#) the Mexican government for independent research into the use of spyware against human rights defenders and journalists. The then UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) also expressed their concern over the Attorney General Office's lack of [independence and transparency](#) with regard to the spyware case.

Despite the Mexican Government's inaction, in 2021, the [Pegasus Project](#)⁶⁵ - an investigation from the non-profit journalism collective Forbidden Stories - revealed that more than 50,000 phone numbers were targeted internationally with malware [by Pegasus spyware](#). Mexico registered more than 15,000 incidents and it was revealed that the spyware was [used extensively](#) during the Nieto administration.⁶⁶

Aristegui Noticias' former editorial coordinator Laura Barranco spoke to us about offline attacks and strange "coincidences" that rattled the team during the timeframe of the spyware attacks, ultimately leading to a spate of resignations. Due to a newsroom-wide security protocol requiring them to report even minor incidents, Aristegui Noticias staff were able to see patterns emerge. For example, five colleagues were mugged within a timespan of three days.

Barranco highlighted the importance of Carmen Aristegui's calm leadership through this crisis:

While I was all panicked and saying, 'Carmen, what are we going to do?' she would say, 'No, little one, don't worry'... It's as time has passed that I've realized that she was just as deeply affected on the inside. I really must commend her for being so serene, so composed, to stoically endure all those horrible things that really affected us all. Including the fact that they emptied her newsroom - because everyone fled.

65 The [Pegasus Project](#) is the joint investigation of 80 reporters from 17 media in 10 countries, coordinated by Forbidden Stories with the technical support of Amnesty International's Security Lab.

66 The current government of Mexico, as of April 2023, [continued](#) to use Pegasus, "despite promising to stop": <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/18/world/americas/pegasus-spyware-mexico.html>

5

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF OUR TWITTER DATASET

Now, we move to a detailed analysis of our unique dataset of 2.3 million tweets collected between 12 November 2021 and 1 March 2022.

Over half (56.2%) of the abuse we detected being directed at Aristegui on Twitter (over a period of just under four months) was personal abuse, much of which was sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit (14%) and homophobic (2%).⁶⁷ Approximately 8% of all abuse in the dataset could be categorized as such.

⁶⁷ See Figure 13.

Aristegui is also heavily attacked for her hard-hitting reporting and her matter-of-fact style. Our data shows that 43% of the abuse she experienced on Twitter between September 2021 and March 2022 represented attacks on her credibility. This signifies a very high rate of abuse designed to undermine the professional reputation of a target. It is one of the highest incidence rates of credibility-based attacks that we have detected across a suite of Big Data Case Studies⁶⁸ focused on emblematic cases of online violence against women journalists.

The clear objective is to destroy public trust in Aristegui's accountability journalism and expose her to increased risk in a country known for high levels of violence towards both women and journalists.

Characteristics of the Carmen Aristegui Twitter dataset

Using a similar methodology to that used for the analysis of English language hate speech,⁶⁹ we collected slurs, and both offensive and sensitive vocabulary in Spanish from translations of our English lists, and from the following sources: offensive words in Spanish from Hatebase,⁷⁰ a glossary of vulgar terms and insults in Spanish collected from a variety of online sources⁷¹ and a set of keywords from HatEval.⁷² These sources were supplemented with contextual knowledge from Mexican Spanish speakers who collaborated on this study as researchers and translators.

As indicated in Chapter 3, we restricted our detailed analysis of the Twitter data to that associated with the account @AristeguiOnline. We closely examined 9,100 tweets sent by that account, and found 18,025 abusive tweets directed at Aristegui, of which 15,631 are replies to her, and 2,213 are retweets of these, while an additional 281 are replies to other people containing abuse in tweets directed at her. This constitutes 1.33% of the tweets in the index excluding those by her, or retweets of her tweets, and 6.54% of all replies to tweets authored by the account in the index.

In other words, the tweets published by @AristeguiOnline are dwarfed by the obviously abusive tweets detected at a rate of almost two to one. This is a rate of abuse that is significantly higher than that experienced by most of our other [Big Data Case Study](#) subjects studied as part of our Online Violence Alert and Response System project.

68 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 US-Filipino journalist Maria Ressa as part of a broader [UNESCO-commissioned study](#). This Big Data Case Study is one of a series being produced by the researchers for a current stream of work commissioned by the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.

69 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: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-04/Gorrell-Greenwood.pdf>

70 <https://hatebase.org/>

71 Such as Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_profanity and: https://www.taringa.net/+humor/glosario-de-terminos-vulgares-e-insultos-malas-palabras_uqoqc

72 HatEval: Multilingual Detection of Hate Speech Against Immigrants and Women in Twitter https://github.com/msang/hateval/blob/master/keyword_set.md

5.1 Categorizing the abuse in the dataset: dominant types, themes and tropes

56% of all abuse in our Twitter dataset pertaining to the @AristeguiOnline account is classed as personal attacks, which include:

- Sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit (approximately 14% of this abuse)
- Homophobic (approximately 2% of this abuse)
- Racist abuse (1%)

43% of all abuse was identified as credibility-related (i.e. attacks on professional reputation)

8% of all abuse in the complete dataset could be categorized as sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit

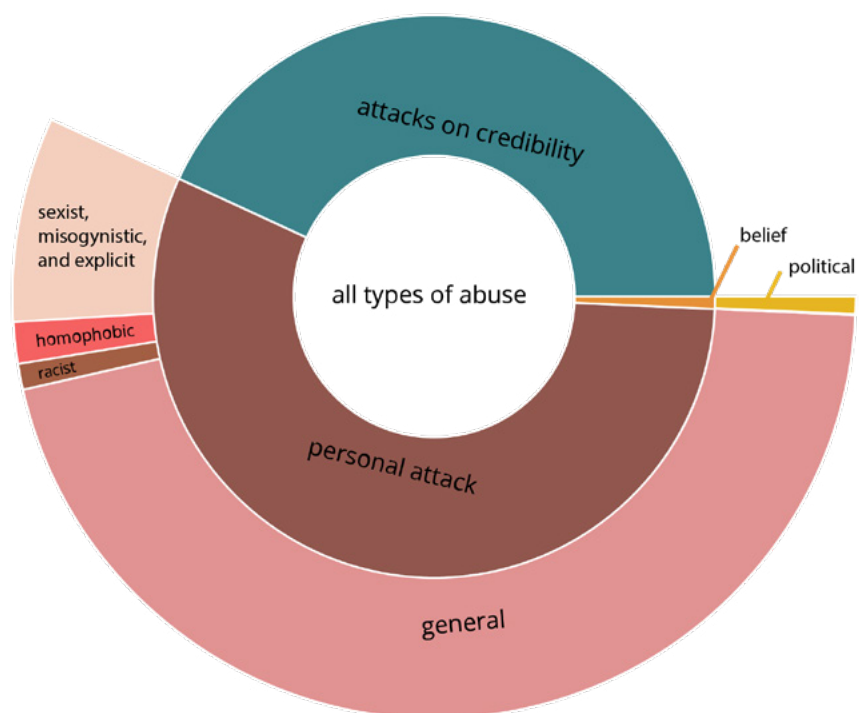


FIGURE 13: Visualization of the categorization of abuse types in the @AristeguiOnline Twitter data analysis.

We identified three main tactics associated with online attacks designed to discredit Aristegui as a journalist and smear her as a woman:

- **Focus on her physical appearance;**
- **Raise questions about her sexuality and her partners;**
- **Query the paternity of her son.**

These are findings which resonate strongly with Aristegui's lived experience of online violence. "The topic of sexuality, the topic of intimate life, the topic of your most personal space, the campaigns to discredit your professional work and, of course...direct threats to your person, in terms of your physical integrity", is how she explained the themes of the abuse she receives, emphasizing that there is always an undercurrent of sexism. "There is a specificity which reflects the prevailing global and historic situation, which is that women experience the kind of situation that makes us vulnerable to the kind of attacks that men do not have".

Aristegui perceives the main purpose of these attacks to be to discredit her and inflict moral injury:

People in government who [see] that some specific investigation could affect them. [So] I'm attacked on social media, via various different mechanisms whose obvious purpose is to damage my credibility and my reputation, to stigmatize me in different ways involving questioning my sexuality, or false information about my sexuality.

According to our analysis of the abuse levelled at Aristegui on Twitter, it is frequently implied that she is a lesbian - which, in a misogynistic and homophobic country, is considered an insult even in 2023. In our data, she is labelled a "dyke" ("lesbian")⁷³ and a "tomboy" ("marimacha"); it is uncommon to have a woman questioning politicians, so she is also labelled as a woman doing a "man's job". Our data confirms a homophobic and misogynistic trend in abuse towards Aristegui that has continued for a decade, as Figures 14 and 15 depict.

FIGURE 14: "Do you wonder if your daughter, sister or aunt is a lesbian? Does she usually dress like a man? Does she hang out with other women? Does she have short hair? Does she have a failed relationship with someone of the opposite sex? We can help you". With Aristegui's image in the middle, this leaflet, which went viral on Twitter,⁷⁴ is from a doctor Rosalía Pineda, owner of a practice that claims to specialize in 'curing' homosexuality. Reported in a 2014 article in *El Siglo de Torreón newspaper*.



73 E.g., tweets which say: "Este año mis regalos serán de puro chocolate **roció** para que se infarten los derechangos y la marimacha de Aristegui por publicar mentiras" (Translation: "This year my presents will be pure rocio chocolates so that right-wingers and Aristegui's tomboy get a heart attack for publishing lies"): <https://twitter.com/cjostos/status/1465738754811912197>; "ESTE MAMARRACHO DE ASTILLERO Y LA MARIMACHA DE ARISTEGUI SON LA MISMA BASURA. SE CREEN PERIODISTAS PERO SON UNOS ARDIDOS Y MENTISOSOS PORQUE DE CUALQUIER LADO LOS HAN BOTADO A PATADAS. A ESTE PAR DE INUTILES [laughing emojis] ARDIDOS" (Translation: "THIS IDIOT [JULIO] ASTILLERO AND ARISTEGUI TOMBOY ARE THE SAME TRASH. THEY THINK THEY ARE JOURNALISTS BUT THEY ARE PROPER FUCKED OFF, LIARS, SINCE THEY WERE KICKED OUT ON THEIR ARSES. TO THE USELESS COUPLE [laughing emojis] MIFFED BASTARDS"): <https://twitter.com/Guiller18596457/status/1465766777510580226>; "Mmmmm, la madre lesbiana y el hijo homosexual. Son inferencias, tal como le gusta a Carmen" (Translation: "Mmmmm, the lesbian mother and the homosexual son. They're inferences [sic], just like Carmen likes it"): (<https://twitter.com/669arturo/status/1467574037060718603>); and a tweet with a vomit emoji pointing at her image (<https://twitter.com/CarlosQ48034856/status/1261996358053044230>).

74 A quote tweet from 2014 sharing the leaflet is still live on X (Twitter), although the image of the leaflet is protected by a one-click system for including "potential sensitive content". The user, who has over 671,000 followers, lauds the use of Aristegui's image and assumption that she is a lesbian: <https://twitter.com/iaurab/status/424243810260901888>



FIGURE 15: Screenshot of an abusive [tweet](#) from November 2016 which says: “How cool that they’re going to put Carmen Aristegui in prison for being a lesbian”. From the archive of Brandon Celaya, Aristegui Noticias’ community manager.⁷⁵

Attempts to falsely link Aristegui romantically with discredited men in business and politics represent another type of online violence experienced by the journalist, as discussed earlier in connection with the 2016 smear campaign that linked her to Mexican billionaire, Carlos Slim Helú. One disinformation campaign suggested she was the ex-wife of former politician Emilio Zebadúa, who is [currently under criminal investigation](#),⁷⁶ the implication being that she is corrupt by association. Female political journalists are still framed as ‘controversial’ in patriarchal Mexico, as ARTICLE 19’s Leopoldo Maldonado told us:

In attacks on social media, it often has to do with the stereotyped roles that are given to women in our country, particularly, but also with differentiated attacks that we identify in the case of many women journalists as a pattern with attacks on privacy and messing with their children.

So, a female political journalist in Mexico will either be smeared by romantic association with business or political figures, or viewed as problematic for operating outside traditional gender roles. The online violence directed at Carmen Aristegui reflects both modes of discrimination.

We will now explore key spikes in online violence directed at Carmen Aristegui connected with her investigative journalism, as they are seen in our Twitter dataset.

⁷⁵ This [screenshot](#) is from a day earlier than an identical post by the same account user which was still online at the time of writing: <https://twitter.com/pabloexmarooned/status/795861074901929984>

⁷⁶ Associated Press [fact-checks](#) the story about Aristegui and Zebadúa: <https://apnews.com/article/ap-verifica-989083833212>. Aristegui was forced to [address](#) rumors that Zebadúa is not father of her child: <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/mexico/sociedad/ataques-contra-carmen-aristegui-la-obligan-a-explicar-su-vida-personal-carta-noti-mex-sanjuana-martinez-emilio-zebadua-5257234.html>. Zebadúa stole millions of pesos; the [case](#) was still open at the time of writing: <https://aristeginoticias.com/2208/mexico/emilio-zebadua-si-aparece-en-informes-y-dictamenes-de-la-uif-y-la-asf-no-rosario-robles-abogado/>

5.2 Key abuse spike: The Mexican president as a trigger

In a [speech accepting](#) the IPI-IMS World Press Freedom Hero award in May 2023, Aristegui pointed out that targeted attacks triggered by senior Mexican political leaders are designed to undercut independent journalists' credibility and public trust in their critical reporting:

...before, it was censorship, espionage, persecution and intimidation - now it is the virulence of the message, naming and shaming... Today, journalists in Mexico receive poison darts from the voice of the President... the purpose of these attacks by political powers is to destroy the credibility journalists enjoy, and trust in society.

The daily morning press conference hosted by Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is a novel exercise in political communication in a country that has experienced presidential silence during former administrations. The impact is widespread, as the agenda-setting event is beamed live across Youtube and national television stations, with daily highlights repeated across all news and social media channels.⁷⁷ The president also uses these press conferences to attack his critics, harass independent journalists, including Aristegui, and take down opposition arguments.⁷⁸ When a journalist issues a challenge backed up with data, he asserts that he has a ["different set of data"](#).

Brandon Celaya, Aristegui's social media manager, told us that the abuse against Aristegui starts to escalate during the daily presidential press conference where President López Obrador routinely attacks her and, in parallel, she asks tough questions about his government on air. On social media, Aristegui is accused of being "part of the opposition" or against "AMLO", as the Mexican president is known by his initials. A mainstream media debate then ensues, and networks of pro-government trolls are activated, piling on against the journalist. It is a vicious cycle.

According to ARTICLE 19's Leopoldo Maldonado, the bot farms have a "leader" called the "maestro de ceremonias" (master of ceremonies) who coordinates the attacks. The key accounts that attack Aristegui were identified in a 2022 [Signa_Lab analysis](#), which found that a "master of ceremonies" determines the target of the attack, and sets the intensity and tone for attacks on those account holders critical of the current administration. The effect is to build up a storm of digital attacks littered with hate speech, as Aristegui told us: "Lately, it seems to me that it has a component... that is more harmful, because it is calculated to damage your credibility... I see the most virulence on Twitter and YouTube".

⁷⁷ The YouTube channel for the president's ["#Entérate..."](#) ["Find out..."] morning press conference has 4.05 million subscribers at the time of writing. A January 2021 Aristegui Noticias article [reported](#) the channel had 235 million views.

⁷⁸ A Reforma article from 2018 called "AMLO poet" once listed 80 of the most common insults used by the president: <https://letraslibres.com/politica/amlo-poeta/>

As Brandon Celaya said, online abuse directed at Aristegui more frequently occurs in the mornings - coinciding with the televised morning press conference, which is also when links to Aristegui's live online radio program are published on social media. This is slightly reduced when Aristegui or Aristegui Noticias are not mentioned in the press conference. Aristegui's former editor, Gustavo Sánchez,⁷⁹ said it is like a "war of nerves" when Aristegui or her team are targeted on social media and the apparently coordinated attacks begin:

If the president says 'it's Aristegui', on those [YouTube] programs...a kind of synchronized swimming happens and then, each social media user with their own space and their own characters can invent what is happening. The biggest lies on the planet may be said out loud there, with impunity, to defend the president and attack the person in turn that the president has vilified. And that is very sinister.

When the president refers to her, Aristegui added, he puts her in harm's way: "If the president says, 'she is against me, and I'm leading a movement of millions'; that is to say, 'if she is against millions, then let millions be against her'. That is the message."

Our data confirms the abuse-triggering function of presidential press conferences

Aristegui Noticias staff accounts suggesting that President López Obrador's morning press conference is a significant abuse trigger accord with our Twitter data analysis. Looking at the obvious abuse identified by our tools during the time period of our data collection (November 2021 to March 2022), over time on a daily basis (Figure 16) we see a consistent level of abuse against Aristegui which mostly consists of abuse contained in replies to the journalist, but which are not retweeted extensively. This means that the abusive tweets directed at Aristegui tend to be comparatively less viral, while the spikes tend to be flatter but unrelenting.

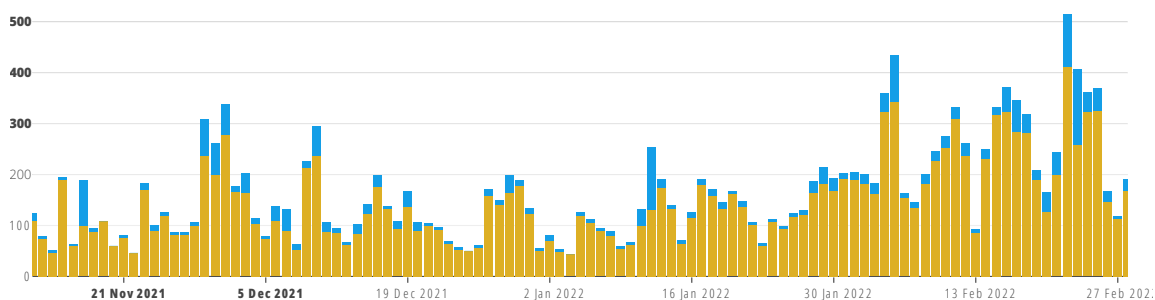


FIGURE 16: Graph showing daily abuse for the @AristeguiNoticias Twitter account.

The most notable abuse spike in the time period of our Twitter collection occurred on 22 February 2022, when we see 516 abusive tweets, of which 104 are retweets (see Figure 16), corresponding to an attack by the president in his morning press conference

79 Sánchez has since left Aristegui Noticias. Since May 2022, the editor ("Coordinador General de Información") is Rafael Cabrera, one of the authors of the 'White House' book.

designed to discredit Aristegui.⁸⁰ This abuse continues for four days, with the highest daily number of retweets of abuse (149) occurring on 23 February.

Earlier, on 4 February 2022, Aristegui was also attacked by the president during his morning press conference. The online violence that followed aimed to discredit and digitally lynch her on Twitter, with the words “chayotera” (journalist on the take), “traidora” (traitor), “vendida” (sell out), and #Chairistegui (lefty-Aristegui) proliferating. The president mocked her: “I met people who saw Carmen Aristegui as the model of communication to follow [but] she is in favor of the conservative bloc. All these slanderous reports, handled by Carmen Aristegui!”⁸¹

Aristegui replied to these declarations designed to weaken trust in her journalism, [commenting wryly](#) that he seemed unaware of his role when referring to her in a very aggressive manner:

The president of a country...decides to use public resources such as the national palace and his own time, to attack me... his political power and resources to attack a journalist. It's pitiful that he uses it to destroy reputations. He has decided to harm.

Another significant abuse spike was recorded the following day - on 5 February 2022 (434 abusive replies, of which 91 are retweets). This corresponds to Aristegui's retort to the president via a tweet⁸² posted by Aristegui Noticias on 4 February.⁸³ The tweet was triggered by the president's claim that Aristegui was politically biased and “against” him. Aristegui's retort received the most abuse (i.e., 5.96% of all replies to it were abusive).

FIGURE 17: Carmen Aristegui responds to AMLO (as the president is known by his initials): “It is unfortunate that the president uses his word, so powerful, to destroy reputations” - a tweet which garnered significant abuse. Credit: Screenshot of a 4 February 2022 [tweet](#) posted by @AristeguiOnline.



Abusive responses included misogynistic tweets like this: “@AristeguiOnline Te convertiste en una puta de la desinformación” (Translation: “@AristeguiOnline You have become a disinformation whore”) and a number of other responses questioning Aristegui's professional credibility, calling her “corrupt”, “hypocritical” and accusing her of destroying her own reputation through her critical reporting of the Mexican administration.

When the president's morning conference introduced a new segment - provocatively called “Who's Who in the Lies” in June 2021, Aristegui responded [via her radio show](#), sparking a Twitter debate which triggered a spike in online violence against her.⁸⁴ She said that while journalists were not above criticism, it was “absolute nonsense that the presidency stands as the holder of the truth”. As President López Obrador [called](#) Aristegui conservative and accused her of being against him and his movement of

⁸⁰ In February 2011, after Aristegui was fired from MVS Radio for her questioning of the former Mexican president, then-politician and founder of political party Morena, López Obrador, [tweeted](#) in support of her and “freedom of expression”. By 22 February 2022, Aristegui said the President López Obrador had attacked her in a “public space”.

⁸¹ Aristegui Noticias [reports](#) in 2021 on the president's accusation that Aristegui is conservative: <https://aristeguinoticias.com/0402/mexico/carga-amlo-nuevamente-contra-aristegui-enterate/>

⁸² Tweet sharing [response](#) to the president's targeting of her in his morning conference, on 4 February 2022.

⁸³ Attack on 4 February 2022, as [reported](#) in Aristegui Noticias.

⁸⁴ See the temporal trajectory of these spikes in timeline in Chapter 2.

millions, some supporters of the administration [responded with mocking tweets](#) like “Así la conservadora” (Thus speaks the conservative). We also see this phrase in our Twitter dataset. Other terms prevalent in our data include: “The journalist defends her sell-out colleagues”; “Absurd that you have the queen of sell outs”; and “Aristegui misrepresents the main idea”. The hashtag #Despropósito (#Absurdity) also featured.

Another slur aimed at Aristegui evident in our data is the hashtag #Panista, insinuating that Aristegui is part of the opposition PAN party.⁸⁵ It is used when Aristegui criticizes the administration or reports news that is critical of the government e.g., “All she wants is to go against López Obrador”. Insults include a play on her surname with the acronym of the opposition party: “You’ve sold out to the PAN, Panistegui”. Subsequently, Aristegui Noticias’ community manager Brandon Celaya said that the attacks on Aristegui typically escalate when she is accused of supporting the opposition party. #PrensaSicaria (#HitmanPress) is also used as a hashtag to discredit Aristegui, her journalism and her outlet. We see 523 instances of this hashtag in our Twitter dataset and the prevalence of the hashtag was also highlighted by Celaya.

FIGURE 18: A [screenshot](#) from a video of Aristegui in the studio used in a meme which translates into English as: “The new Aristegui, zero objectivity. Highly tendentious”. The abusive meme is a [reply](#) to a [tweet](#) from Aristegui Noticias in May 2020 [reporting](#) that there was a coordinated attack by officials from the Mexican state news agency Notimex.⁸⁶

The most prevalent hashtags associated with the Twitter attacks on Aristegui in our dataset riffed offensively off her last name, including: [#Chayistegui](#) and [#Chairistegui](#) - both variations on the idea of (“Sellout journalist”), highlighting the disinformation tactic of inverting the truth and demonizing the target via false narratives. According to Brandon Celaya’s reading of this behaviour “...not a day goes by that [an offensive] hashtag crops up in anything up to... three posts on social media”.



Reinforcing a culture of impunity

Another constant chilling phrase appearing in tweets in our dataset is “Por eso los matan” (“That’s why they get killed”) - justifying violence against the press and suggesting impunity for crimes against journalists like Aristegui.

⁸⁵ PAN as an acronym is the Spanish inversion of the “National Action Party”, a conservative political party, which is currently the opposition.

⁸⁶ “Aristegui Noticias publishes a video documenting the existence of the “Avengers N” group on WhatsApp, from which Notimex officials coordinated bot attacks on journalists they considered adversaries and to promote the content of the Mexican state news agency: <https://aristeguinoticias.com/1405/lomasdestacado/video-comprueba-participacion-de-funcionarios-en-operacion-contra-criticos-de-notimex/>



88 "Asedio, amenaza y ataque: la condición de vulnerabilidad de periodistas en México": <https://signalab.mx/2022/02/08/asedio-amenaza-y-ataque-la-condicion-de-vulnerabilidad-de-periodistas-en-mexico/#seccion-02>

The president's tactic of framing critical independent journalism as "opposition" to his political movement - and thus, [he argues](#), the Mexican people - was clear in the attack [he directed](#) at Aristegui and *Proceso* magazine after their chocolate factory investigation in November 2021:⁸⁹

Proceso and Carmen Aristegui - these two in particular - have never been in favor of our movement. They say that they are independent... and I maintain that yes, they are independent - but independent of the people. They have never been involved with, they never have done journalism for the people.

The president also reiterated his description of Aristegui as "conservative" - again positioning her in opposition to his populist left-wing government, giving rise to the #ApagaAristegui (#ShutDownAristegui or #TurnOffAristegui - i.e., turn off her program) hashtag. It is a common hashtag, occurring 16,660 times in our Twitter dataset. A number of these tweets seem to be generated by an account which calls Aristegui variations of the phrase "Pinche carroña hipócrita" ("fucking hypocritical scavenger"). They also post the meme in Figure 20, depicting her as a clown. The [character of the clown](#) refers to "Brozo", a controversial, misogynistic Mexican TV clown, who is linked to a right-wing political party.

FIGURE 20: Abusive image-based meme depicting Aristegui: "Once she was the best, now she's a miserable clown." This meme was [posted on Facebook](#) in mid 2022 and it was still [circulating on Twitter](#) a year later. We also see the [clown emoji](#) used to deride Aristegui on Twitter as far back as 2020 and a YouTube influencer [ridiculing Aristegui as a clown](#) in 2022 in the context of the President's press conference attacks on her.



5.4 Key abuse spike: "The luxury life of AMLO's son" investigation

On 28 January 2022, Aristegui broadcast a story about an investigation first reported by [Mexicans Against Corruption](#) and [Latinus](#) media: "[The luxury life of AMLO's son](#)". It revealed that President López Obrador's eldest son, José Ramón López Beltrán, was renting luxury homes in Texas from an oil company executive who had a contract with the Mexican government, while his father had been advocating national austerity as president. In response, López Obrador again discredited Aristegui during his morning press conference.

When the story was first reported, it was also broadcast on controversial journalist [Carlos Loret de Mola's](#) TV program. The abuse spike in our data corresponds to a popular

⁸⁹ "AMLO rechaza reportaje de Aristegui: 'Es una periodista independiente... pero del pueblo'": <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/2021/11/29/amlo-rechaza-reportaje-de-aristegui-es-una-periodista-independiente-pero-del-pueblo/>

hashtag we see in our dataset as a whole, and even more prominently in the subset of obviously abusive tweets: #LordMontajes, the nickname given to [Loret de Mola](#),⁹⁰ who has exposed alleged corruption in the family and government of President López Obrador. Loret de Mola [accused the president of orchestrating a smear campaign against him](#) as a result of this exposé. This provides more context for the presence of the #AMLO hashtag in our dataset.

FIGURE 21: In response to a May 2023 [tweet](#) by Aristegui Noticias announcing Aristegui's World Press Freedom Hero Award 2023, came a mocking comment on Twitter. A "really good joke. It seems those who give those awards out don't know that 'Prianistegui'" (a play on the former ruling party's acronym, PRI, and her surname) "already sold the freedom of the press to the old puppet head and to Lord Montajes". In the first meme, Aristegui's head is Photoshopped on a kneeling woman's body, with the bare rear end of Photoshopped right wing opponent of the president, Claudio X. González, in front of her. The second meme has a warped caricature of Aristegui and it says: "Here barking for Reforma".



FIGURE 22: Top hashtags appearing in the abusive part of the dataset (excluding retweets), in Spanish and translated in English.

90 Loret de Mola, formerly a Televisa presenter (on the program *Primero Noticias*), is also known for a breach of journalistic ethics after he [broadcast a fake police raid, leading to the nickname "Lord Montage"](#). He has also been discredited by the current government, with President López Obrador twice bringing up the journalist's salary in his morning press conference in February 2022: <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/mexicos-president-reveals-journalists-income-and-the-public-reacts-in-unprecedented-ways-on-social-media/>

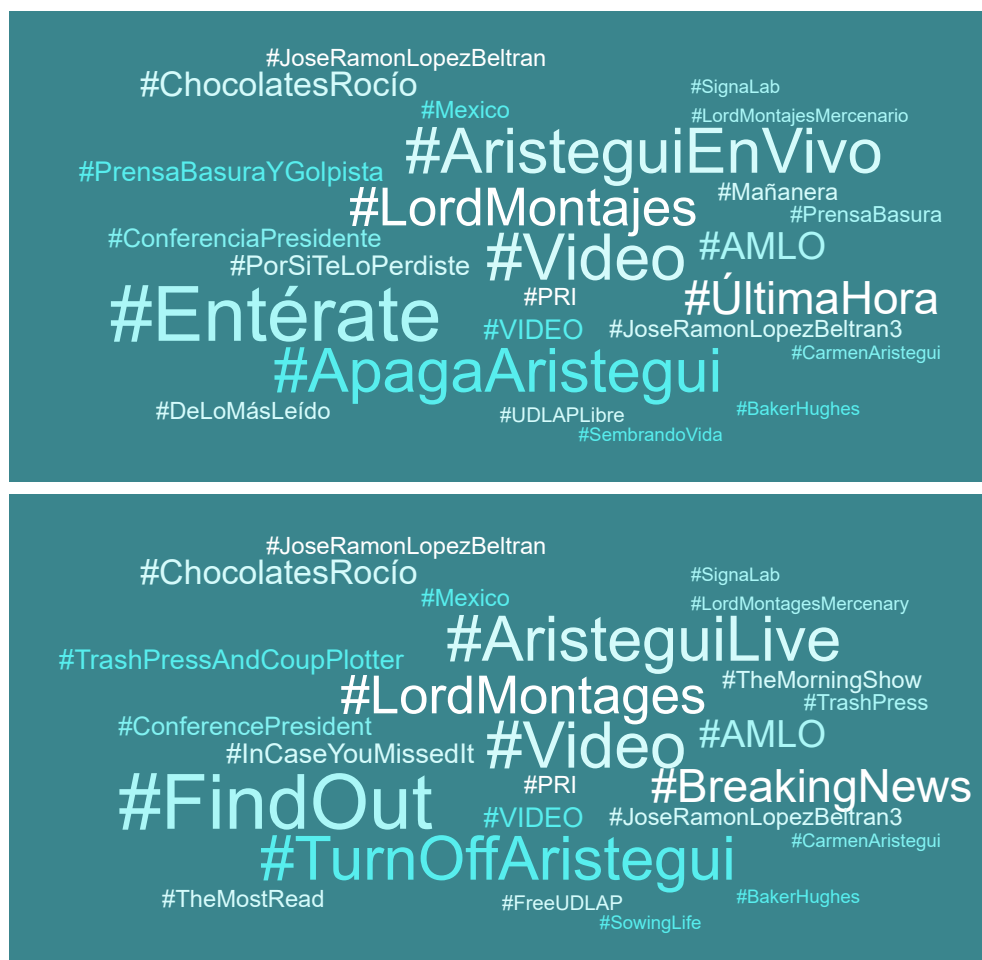


FIGURE 23: Top hashtags occurring in the entire dataset (including retweets), in Spanish and translated in English.

Hashtags like those in the word clouds above, while clearly derogatory, tend to fly under the radar of abuse detection systems such as ours, which explains their relatively infrequent occurrence in our abusive dataset. Similarly, we see hashtags such as #PrensaBasuraYGolpista (which translates into English as something like #TrashPressAndCoupPlotter). This hashtag, which demonizes the press as a whole and insinuates that it is unfairly critical of the current government, is used frequently in response to press critique of López Obrador's administration. Aristegui told us that these strategies are designed "to destroy someone morally". She said:

It feels like the main online attacks happened under this government. ... I have found that this scope of annihilation towards journalists falls within that kind of online landscape, and in the voice of the president... the other [government] was... not as intense or aggressive.

We also see a number of hashtags associating Aristegui with falsehoods and corruption (e.g., #falsa, #corrupta), and they are the ones that predominantly get retweeted. This is a classic gaslighting tactic associated with online violence against female journalists which sees the target (ironically) falsely accused of peddling disinformation. This was similarly notable in our case study on Maria Ressa.

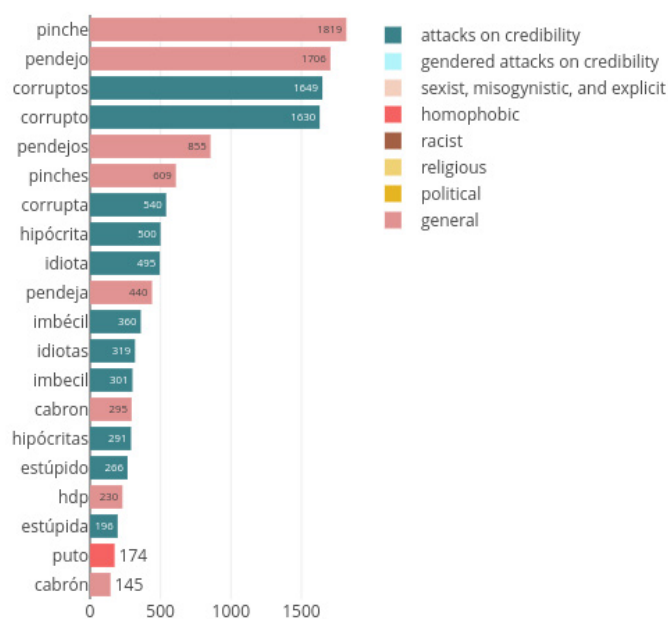
5.5 Demonisation of a pantsuited, short-haired woman journalist who speaks truth to power

The most repetitive offensive terms (including hashtags) used in online violence against Aristegui captured in our Twitter dataset overall are:

- #Chayotera (Sell out)
- Mentirosa (liar)⁹¹
- Vendida (sell out)
- #AristeguiConservadora (AristeguiConservative)
- #AristeguiMiente (AristeguiLies)
- #AristeguiTraidora (Traitor)
- #Panistegui (Aristegui-PAN)
- #PrensaSicaria (HitmanPress)
- #PrensaProstituida (ProstitutedPress)
- #PrensaCarroñera (ScavengerPress)
- #PrensaCorrupta (CorruptPress)

We can see from figures 24 and 25 that the most frequently used abusive terms in the database (excluding hashtags) are a mixture of general personal insults e.g., “pendeja” (“asshole”), “pinche” (“a general unpleasant kind of person”) and reputational insults attacking her professional credibility (e.g. “corrupta” (“corrupt”); “hipócrita” (“hypocrite”); “imbécil” (“imbecile”).⁹²

FIGURE 24: Top 20 abusive terms used against Aristegui in original tweets and replies, excluding retweets and hashtags.⁹³



⁹¹ Example of an abusive tweet from December 2021 where someone has scrawled ‘liar’ over an image of Aristegui: https://twitter.com/Amina_maktub/status/1466771769000345606?s=20

⁹² We note that there are some masculine (e.g., pendejo) and plural terms here also identified - this can be because the tweet in which they appear is nevertheless identified as abusive towards her. For example “you are all corrupt”. The limitations of automated abuse identification technology should be noted, however.

⁹³ English translations: Corrupt people (plural), corrupt, fucking, stupid, stupid people (plural), corrupt woman, fuckers, hypocrite, idiot, imbecile, idiot people (plural), hypocritical people, imbecile, bastard, stupid, SOB (son of a bitch), stupid woman, male prostitute, dirty woman.

The word cloud of the top 100 abusive terms in Figure 25 also shows sexist abuse and references to sexual terms, such as “puta” (“bitch / prostitute”), “hija de puta” (“daughter of a bitch”), and its apparent abbreviation “HDP” (like “SOB”, a common insult literally meaning “son of a bitch”, but used in a more directly insulting way than its English counterpart).

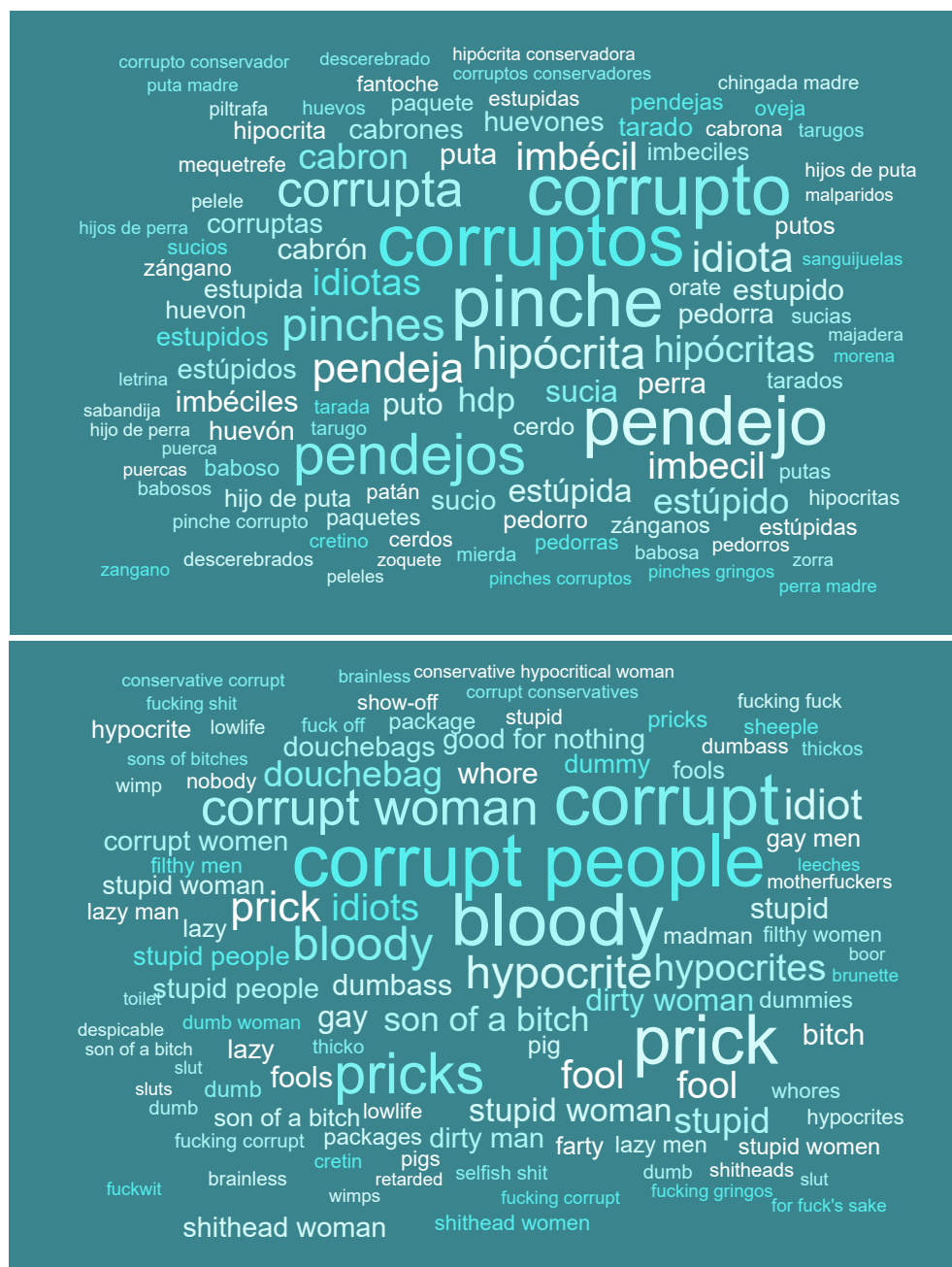


FIGURE 25: The top 100 most frequent abusive terms against Aristegui including retweets, in Spanish and translated into English.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Standing out in this word cloud are the terms “corrupta”, “idiotas”, “hipócrita”, “pinche”, “pendeja” (feminine versions of ‘corrupt’, ‘idiot’, ‘hypocrite’, ‘fucking’ and ‘asshole’ in Spanish). Also prevalent are “corrupto”, “pendejo” and “pinche” (masculine versions of ‘corrupt’, ‘idiot’ and ‘fucking’ in Spanish) - see footnote 93 for an explanation.

5.6 Who are Carmen Aristegui's attackers?

There are 534 accounts in our Twitter dataset which sent five or more clearly abusive tweets directed at Aristegui's @AristeguiOnline account. The [most prolifically](#) abusive account sent 48 abusive replies. The account, which has since been deleted from Twitter, posted continuously over the time period of our data collection, but with a spike from early February 2022 onwards. Although the account sent replies to a large number of @AristeguiOnline tweets, these messages were often identical and, unusually, with some time delay. In general, the accounts sending abuse seem to be a mixture of people who have a huge number of followers, and whose tweets will get widely disseminated very quickly, and people who have very few followers but who tweet voraciously, suggesting bot-like, or at least deliberately coordinated, abusive behavior.

While a large number of followers is indicative of extensive potential reach of an abusive tweet, even a user with a very small number of followers can still achieve widespread reach if one or more of those followers are themselves very influential, or if there is a large coordinated network of followers who all retweet abuse.

It has also been suggested that people who do not use real-sounding names and who include numbers in their username (often the default suggestion when setting up an account) might be more likely to be members of "networks of amplifiers."⁹⁵ Other tell-tale features found in our data included the lack of biographical information associated with the account and the clear use of the account to post pornographic images.

The graph in Figure 26 shows the time between a tweet being posted by Aristegui and the first abusive reply to it in the initial hour after posting - specifically, the number of tweets which had their first abusive reply after each minute in the hour. In the hour directly following a tweet by Aristegui, the vast majority of abusive replies were posted within a few minutes, with the highest number occurring between two to three minutes. But several abusive replies were published within 10 seconds of the tweet being posted. This is also strongly suggestive of some kind of coordinated troll behaviour, similar to the case of Indian journalist [Rana Ayyub](#), the subject of one of our related [Big Data Case Studies](#).

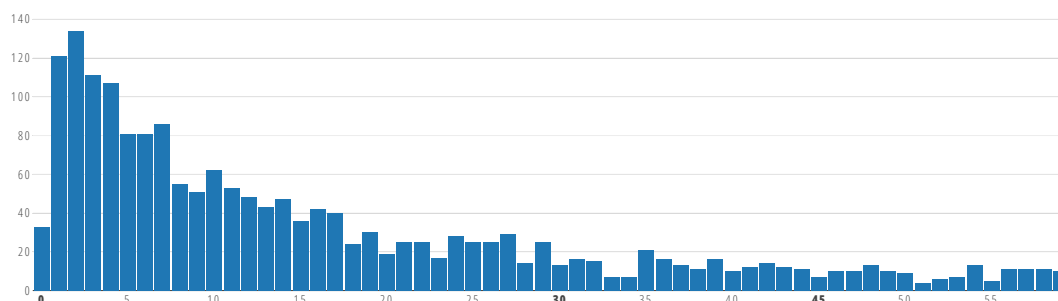


FIGURE 26: Time in minutes between a tweet being posted by Aristegui and the first abusive reply.

⁹⁵ See a Twitter [thread](#) from a security researcher in March 2022 about "occasional speculation about the significance of Twitter usernames with around 6+ appended digits. A marker of inauthenticity? I'd (cautiously) say: yes and no".

5.7 Connections between Aristegui's abusers

When we plot the graph of the accounts which sent the most abuse in replies to Aristegui's tweets, we see a very densely packed network of people sending abusive replies to the same tweet. The grey lines indicate many connections between abuse senders, while the large colored dots indicate that these people sent many abusive replies.

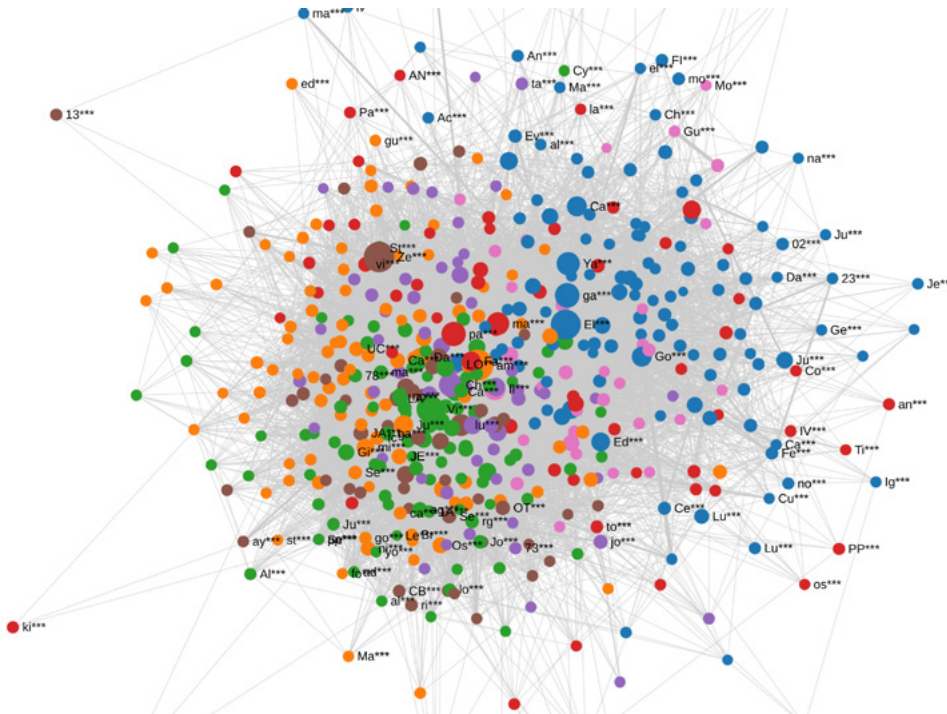


FIGURE 27: Graph of anonymized Twitter accounts which co-abused Aristegui by sending five or more abusive replies to one or more of the same tweets by her. The thicker the edges between them, the more abusive replies they sent to the same tweet(s).

In the zoomed-in view in Figure 28, we see one account (large green dot in the center) sending abusive replies to 28 different @AristeguiOnline tweets. The proliferation of other large dots connected to account shows that a number of others closely connected to that person also sent a large number of abusive replies. Those in green belong to the same "abuse community".

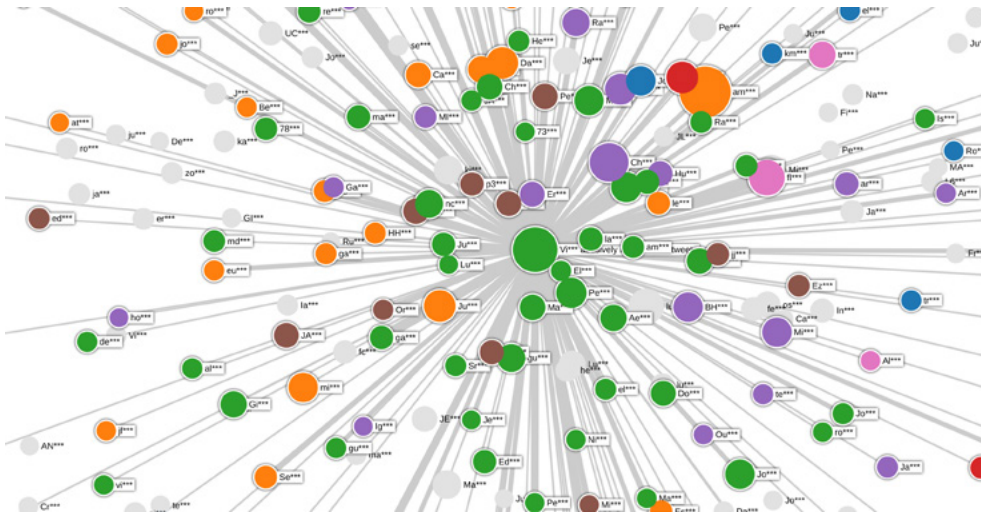


FIGURE 28: Zoomed-in graph showing the connections between specific abusers of Carmen Aristegui.

6

WHEN DOING JOURNALISM MEANS FAMILY AND COLLEAGUES ARE TARGETED IN REPRISALS



Aristegui can distinguish the multi-pronged risks associated with her situation: she is ferociously attacked online in episodes that are frequently instigated or fuelled by the current Mexican president, and she faces serious physical danger for her independent reporting, which radiates to her family and colleagues.

In one distressing incident, Aristegui was targeted through her then teenage son, Emilio. She found a pile of mock WANTED posters with his face on them, left at the bus stop opposite the MVS radio station, where she worked:

They left a big pile of these flyers... so that I would see them. The wind scattered them all over the street... and the cars drove over them... and there were so many it made a huge mess... Then you see your son's photo on the flyer with the word "Wanted", in the mud, being trod on, [flattened] along the whole street. It was a terrible message, a terrifying image. I remember that my colleagues from the radio station came out...their instinct was to try to pick them up because it was really awful seeing Emilio's face on the ground, being run over by car tyres. Can you imagine?

As discussed above, Emilio Aristegui was later targeted with Pegasus spyware in parallel with his mother.

Aristegui's long-term colleague and former Aristegui Noticias editorial coordinator Laura Barranco told us that the only limits to Aristegui's optimism were the hacking and surveillance of her son through Pegasus spyware, coupled with recriminations from the president:

That shook her profoundly, and who wouldn't feel like that...I think she said, 'Do whatever you want with me, but my children... don't you mess with my son.' She even had to send him out of the country for several years. Because if she didn't, there was no guarantee, no certainty that he would be safe. I insist, at that point we were up against none other than the president.

The online smear campaigns and incidents of offline attack and surveillance endured by Aristegui over the past decade have chilled her investigative journalism in the sense that some of her sources have "distanced themselves", as she [said in 2023](#), "because there was no way we could guarantee the security of their information". She also admits that the abuse has restricted her participation in public life. She no longer feels safe going to certain events "after what's happened to me with the president, and what's happening on social media". She told us:

I think that if I was invited, and I appeared in an open public forum on the Zócalo, the country's main square, with loads of people listening to the speaker...I would be afraid of being there. So now I find myself afraid of going to a place I've had no problem going to throughout my life.

These attacks have also had a dramatic impact on colleagues at Aristegui's eponymous news outlet. Laura Barranco described the Pegasus spyware episode, and the offline attacks coinciding with the Aristegui Noticias newsroom raid in 2016 as "strategies designed to cause dread". As a result, climate in the Aristegui Noticias newsroom became tense, and led to multiple staff resignations. Barranco said she did not understand why the newsroom seemed empty until she saw the 2019 documentary [Radio Silence](#) about Aristegui:⁹⁶ "Of course! With the raid, the muggings... it's logical that their families would say, or they would say to themselves, 'well, it's best to leave.' There were very few of us who stayed."

These attacks also [serve](#) to silence other women journalists in Mexico, according to Lucía Lagunes of the civil society organization CIMAC: "When journalists with public profiles are attacked, the message that is sent to female journalists in the provinces is: 'If that can happen to Aristegui, what could happen to us?'"⁹⁷

96 The documentary [Radio Silence](#), directed by Juliana Fanjul and released in 2019, follows Aristegui in the three years after she was sacked for good from MVS in 2015.

97 Lagunes, of the Women's Communication and Information Centre, spoke in a panel event with Aristegui on press freedom staged by ARTICLE 19 and the Norwegian embassy in March 2022.

Sustained by support

Each award-winning piece of journalism published by Aristegui is met with inevitable censorship, surveillance and smear campaigns. However, she continues to resist the pressure, partly sustained by the support she finds among her loyal audiences⁹⁸ and the international journalism community. Although it has somewhat diminished since 2015, when the online violence Aristegui experiences began to escalate sharply, there is still evidence of online support as well as abuse. In the end, her journalism speaks for itself, she says:

Although I might be abused, I'm also very much appreciated. So, I'll hold on to the messages of solidarity people send me, people who appreciate what we do, I'll hold on to the way the public participates in our programs, I'll hold on to our audience numbers which are really high and tell me that people are behind us and are following what we're doing.

There is also a core of resilience and determination in Aristegui, an impulse to pursue her work even in the face of extreme risk. As Aristegui said in [Radio Silence](#): "Optimism is almost a moral obligation; the other alternative is to give up. And at the moment, I have no plan for it".

98 When Aristegui was fired from MVS, people arrived at MVS in the south of Mexico City to protest: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhhykLPMdJo>

7

CONCLUSION



This Big Data Case Study has thrown essential light on the crisis of online violence against female journalists in Mexico through a detailed analysis of original qualitative and quantitative research focused on the emblematic case of a high-impact Mexican investigative journalist. Through a process of synthesizing and contextualizing the data, we have drawn a richly textured picture of Carmen Aristegui's case which we hope enables a deeper understanding of the situation of online violence against female journalists in Mexico.

Aristegui experiences unrelenting digital attacks, including abuse, harassment, death threats, targeted surveillance, and coordinated disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting her and eroding trust in her public interest journalism. The attacks are fuelled by senior political actors, including successive presidents, viralized by troll farms, and enabled by social media platforms, in particular Twitter, where Aristegui was even '[assassinated](#)'.

In Mexico, female journalists typically face sexist and sexualised abuse that ridicules and criticizes their appearance, questions their sexuality, commentates on their partners (or the absence of a partner), and targets their families. The level of abuse that they receive shows that they represent a threat to powerful actors who seek to isolate and endanger them by weaponizing social media against them.

All of these facets of gendered online violence towards Mexican journalists are evident in Aristegui's case. This violence has radiated to her child, her sources, her colleagues, and translated to offline threats. The most common methods of attack faced by Aristegui are orchestrated trolling campaigns, doxxing, misogynistic harassment and censorship.

The stigmatization of certain journalists - including Carmen Aristegui - by Mexico's President López Obrador during his live-streamed morning press conferences generates a permissive environment for online violence with a cascading effect, adding to the deterioration of the current environment of anti-press violence.

However, it is fundamentally important to recognize that high levels of physical violence coexist with online violence in Mexico, where the [assassination of journalists with impunity](#) is a worsening crisis. While online violence is sometimes linked to physical violence, [other research shows](#) that the online to offline trajectory is not commonly accepted or prioritized in Mexico. Mexican journalists [focus](#) on "physical integrity, an interest that explains why...digital safety seems to have been neglected or placed in a second order of importance by them."⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the function of online violence as a potential trigger for offline harm cannot be ignored, because impunity for online violence aids and abets impunity for crimes against journalists. This is especially important in a country with such a shocking impunity rate.

The situation in Mexico - where journalists are discredited in official presidential speeches, subjected to orchestrated online violence campaigns, and at extreme risk of physical violence - is similar to that of the Philippines. American-Filipino Nobel Peace Prize winner María Ressa, who has also been at the receiving end of presidentially-triggered pile-ons, [said](#): "Strength is like bamboo. When there's a storm, the oak tree can't bend with the wind, is uprooted and dies. But bamboo sways and bends with the typhoon, weathering the storm. And in the aftermath, there it remains, standing strong"

This sentiment reflects Aristegui's own stoic mission. She has shown professional and personal resilience in the face of attacks from successive administrations spanning the political spectrum:

I think that anyone who does something in life, on any topic or circumstance, who spends their time, their energy, their intelligence, their talent, the skills they have to do anything well - they have a mission.

Carmen Aristegui's voice in Mexican democracy is essential and incorruptible. It cannot be silenced.

99 González, R. A. & Rodelo, F. (2020). Double-edged knife: practices and perceptions of technology and digital security among Mexican journalists in violent contexts, Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25729861.2020.1746502> 2

POSTSCRIPT

This report was produced with the support of research funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of a broader project investigating the development of an Online Violence Alert and Response System. To that end, the research is investigating 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”](#) (ICFJ: 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.
- Read [further ICFJ Big Data Case Studies](#) on journalists Carole Cadwalladr (UK), Rana Ayyub (India), Ghada Oueiss (Lebanon/Qatar).
- [The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#) (ICFJ/UNESCO:2022), a groundbreaking global study on online violence against women journalists that includes over 60 recommendations for action.
- [“A global snapshot of the incidence and impacts of online violence against women journalists”](#) (UNESCO: 2020), based on a survey conducted by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- [Guidelines for monitoring online violence against female journalists](#), (OSCE: 2023)
- [Online Violence Response Hub](#), founded by IWMF and ICFJ as a project of the Coalition Against Online Violence (CAOV).

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ICFJ empowers journalists to produce reportage that leads 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 time of converging existential threats and challenges.



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