

“If you have an official press badge, nothing should happen to you:” Security, privacy, and safety for student journalists in the United States

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Abstract

Journalism plays a key role in democracy and social movements. Prior work has addressed the threats, practices, and needs of professional journalists, but little has been done to understand student journalists—a critical demographic to support as they are the next generation of professional journalists and have historically been at the forefront of large social movements. However, student journalists operate in a very different social context than professionals due to their close and complex relationship with university administration, faculty, and fellow students. Here, we conduct an exploratory semi-structured interview study with 18 student journalists at our university to better understand their security, privacy, and safety threats, practices, and needs. We find the unique positions of student journalists *as students* create power dynamics that produce threats to their security and privacy, differing in nature and magnitude from professional journalists. In response, students devise technical and journalistic strategies to balance the safety and integrity of their reporting.

1 Introduction, Background, and Methods

Journalists are critical to social movements as reporters of current events and amplifiers of protesters’ voices. Indeed, freedom of the press is a core tenet of the US Constitution—yet history shows journalists face arrest at protests [15].

Recently, college and university campuses were sites of national news when students around the US set up pro-Palestinian encampments, protests, and counter-protests [5], reflecting global unrest over the Israel-Palestine conflict.

While professional news publications reported on these campus protests, student publications were essential due to their intimate access and understanding of each campus.

However, some student journalists were arrested, suspended, or even expelled while working as reporters [1, 6]. These actions carry magnified consequences because the university often functions as a total institution: acting as landlord, employer, educator, and, for international students, the guarantor of their legal status. Student publications may also rely on university resources like funding or cloud drives to sustain operations. This power dynamic, combined with students’ identities as young, non-professional reporters, fundamentally shifts how they navigate security, privacy, and safety threats.

While there has been excellent work on the security and privacy of *professional* journalists [3, 4, 7–9, 11–14, 16], we do not yet have an understanding of how student journalists experience security, privacy, and safety in the context of their roles *as students*, particularly when reporting may be adversarial to their university. Here, we ask the following research questions:

- What security, privacy, and safety threats do student journalists face in the context of their dual role as students and journalists?
- How do student journalists respond to these threats?
- What specifically about *being a student* amplifies or alleviates these threats?

Methods We conducted an IRB-approved semi-structured interview study with 18 student journalists at our university, a US university that experienced protests in 2023–2025. Over approximately six months, we interviewed 18 student journalists. After transcribing all interviews, we used reflexive thematic analysis [2] to qualitatively analyze our semi-structured interview data. Throughout our study, we deeply considered ethics and participant and researcher safety and comfort, taking care with sensitive details and records kept.

2 Findings

We find student journalists perceive privacy threats to their source material, both from the university and other students; they also largely tolerate online hate and harassment, because journalistic ideals necessitate a relationship with the public. When reporting on protests, student journalists also face threats to their physical and ontological security from law enforcement or the university, as they may be arrested, suspended, or expelled if confused for protesters. The nature and magnitude of these risks are shaped by the power dynamics surrounding student journalists—including faculty, peers, professional news organizations and, mostly saliently, university administration. P16 mused that *“the university could crack down on us.... And if they wanted to sanction us, they certainly have the power to do so”* (P16). Although participants said there was **no evidence of university censorship or access-ing confidential data**, the *fear* of such abuse drove student journalists’ threat models and privacy strategies.

Threats to data privacy from other students and the university From other students, data privacy threats are ephemeral—keeping news proprietary before it breaks. From the university, journalists fear censorship and compromise of raw material, though no participants experienced either.

Student journalists manage data privacy from other students through access control and physical privacy, and from the university through the use of non-university email and cloud accounts. P3’s publication had *“a lot of our footage living on our [university’s] Google Drives,”* but *“decided after that one really, really big protest...it would probably be good to move our footage [to a non-university drive] and also to share it with a smaller group of people”* (P3). At another’s publication, an editor strictly *“didn’t want anything we were writing as [publication] to be on any [university] drive”* (P16). However, they are tightly constrained by funding: P9 noted that their publication is *“struggling with finances right now to pay for the [publication] email addresses”* (P9).

Protecting student journalists from hate and harassment Journalists reporting on political topics and editors working with external authors of opinion editorials (op-eds) face harassment in the form of hateful messages, doxing, and threats—not unlike professional journalists [10], but without institutional support.

Publications balanced journalistic integrity and ideals (like authorship transparency and being an open forum) with student emotional and physical safety. At some publications, *“we obviously don’t touch our comments”* (P12) on Instagram. Other publications use a reactive model, *“monitor[ing] the comments, so if there’s something not acceptable, we take it down”* (P11)—while P9 said their managing board proactively reviews all comments, approving them *“except if it’s offensive, like targeted towards a staff writer or towards a*

specific community” (P9). And P4’s publication sometimes turns off comments entirely: *“there was a time when the comments were really increasing...so...we started filtering comments...but I think now...you can’t see the comments. They’ve been blocked”* (P4).

To mitigate targeted harassment, publications occasionally reordered bylines so senior staff absorbed the backlash. P3 described that, after a writer received overwhelming backlash, editors *“put their names...in the byline first, so that people would stop emailing [the writer] and instead would email them”* (P3). Many publications do have a strict policy against removing bylines, for journalistic integrity: *“[publication] will never remove a writer’s name from a piece... ethically, why would you believe this article that’s making these huge claims written by, you don’t know who, right? I think a big part of that is being able to attach the work to a name”* (P7).

Threats to physical security extend to arrest, suspension, and expulsion. Student journalists reporting at protests were arrested or detained by local police, even after disclosing their status as press. P6 described the police as their *“main concern,”* sharing that *“I almost did get into an altercation with the police; they threatened to arrest me and I just ran away”* (P6). P9 described a time when police confined student reporters in a campus building: *“a lot of the student journalists... were locked inside [the building] and they were not let out by the police because they didn’t want everyone to report...that was scary.”* (P9) Conflict also occurred when journalists were denied legitimacy *due to being students*: a guard refused P18 entry to a press zone after checking their student ID, insisting, *“you’re an undergrad, you can’t be press”* (P18).

Looking forward, as usable security researchers Participants expressed a firm commitment to the ideals of journalism: for P3, the goal is *“to make things better for people...I became a journalist to speak truth to power...that’s the point, right?”* (P3). However, these ideals are in tension with privacy, safety, and security, in part due to how technology fails to support student journalists. The usable security research community has the responsibility to work towards technologies that *do* support them. Technologies alone *cannot* rebuild a lasting relationship of trust and respect with institutions, but our goal as technologists should be to empower student journalists in developing strong and trusted security, privacy, and safety standards, reducing vulnerabilities caused by power dynamics with surrounding establishments—by connecting with them directly as we are *on their campus* with them, creating mechanisms of institutional support, and building sustainable and low-cost or free technologies that support their independence. This independence, however, must be accompanied by institutional policy that ensures the legitimacy of student journalists as mature members of the press, safeguarding their physical and digital privacy and safety, while recognizing the duality of their role as press and students.

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