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Artan Haraqia

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# Mob Censorship Against Journalists in Kosovo During the 2025 Parliamentary Election Campaign

MA. Artan Haraqia

Email: [artanharaqia@gmail.com](mailto:artanharaqia@gmail.com)

## Abstract

In an era of rapidly evolving forms of attacks against the media, mob censorship has emerged as a "game-changer" that has fundamentally transformed the safety, behavior, and professional practices of journalists online. By becoming targets of coordinated attacks, this phenomenon forces journalists to reassess their digital presence and professional strategies. While global research analyzes its scale and consequences, understanding the specific mechanisms and dynamics of this phenomenon in local contexts remains challenging for many reasons. To address this gap and capture the complexity of the phenomenon from the most immediate perspective, this study in Kosovo employs a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with active field journalists. This approach allows for an in-depth and flexible exploration of journalists' personal experiences, adaptation strategies, and interpretations. The aim of this paper is to identify, through these interviews, systematize, and analyze the patterns of mob censorship, its motivations, and its destructive impact on journalistic practice and public discourse in Kosovo. In this way, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of a critical threat to democracy and freedom of the press in the country.

**Keywords:** Mob censorship, digital mobs, social media, journalists, politics

## Introduction

Online media have revolutionized the dissemination and consumption of information, but at the same time they have created a new environment for censorship against journalists. Mob censorship (i.e., crowd-based online censorship) of journalists has become a frequent phenomenon on social networks, with serious consequences for press freedom and the public's right to impartial and accurate information. As a form that seeks to control or halt public communication by platform users (Waisbord, 2023), and as a phenomenon that exploits modern technologies to attack journalists (Henrichsen & Shelton, 2022), this censorship has made journalists more cautious and more strategic about their online presence in the face of campaigns and hostile sentiments directed against them (Waisbord, 2023).

Censorship as a concept has existed even prior to the digitalization of information. As a phenomenon, it is quite old. However, one definition of censorship refers to the suppression or prohibition of speech, public communication, or other information considered unpleasant, harmful, or

sensitive by the authorities. Thus, it concerns the control and punishment of any word or opinion that differs from that of high authorities. This practice may affect the restriction of access to alternative viewpoints, shaping public opinion and influencing discourse within society.

However, with changes and the development of technology, the form of attack or censorship directed at journalists has also changed. Unlike traditional censorship, online censorship is a different type of censorship that is being applied by the crowd. From the traditional form of crowd censorship from top to bottom—that is, from the attacks and control that different types of powers, especially authoritarian and dictatorial ones, have exercised over citizens or intellectuals—online crowd censorship, markedly modified and conceptualized as a new theory in recent years, is now taking place from the bottom up, that is, from the online public/crowd against experts, professionals, or the intellectual elite. As Waisbord (2020) notes, three key developments have contributed to the emergence of online attacks against journalists: the public's easy access to journalists, the presence of toxic cultures on the internet, and the populist demonization of journalists by certain segments of politics.

Undoubtedly, politics—particularly politics grounded in populist rhetoric—is one of the principal elements motivating Mob Censorship. As other scholars affirm (Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016; Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2019), Mob Censorship has primarily been concentrated on political margins or the work of non-elites, yet hostility toward journalists through digital media channels also comes from political elites who possess substantial technical resources (Howard, 2020).

The growth of this phenomenon in recent years has turned Mob Censorship into an important field of study. Its theory offers an opportunity to re-examine how digital communication brings hatred to journalists in real time and how it affects their daily work (Lind, 2023).

This form of censorship can undermine reporting ethics and objectivity, as journalists may no longer report facts, they consider important, but instead adapt them to the dominant opinion in order to avoid criticism or attacks (Lind, 2023). Mob Censorship can also create an uneven playing field in which certain voices and perspectives are prioritized over others, leading to a deterioration of public debate and to a decline in citizens' trust in the information provided by the media (Waisbord, 2020).

In this situation, experts and the elite hesitate to engage publicly in order to oppose populists. In online communication, populists receive greater support because they appear to be the "majority," unlike elite experts, or, as Eco (2015) notes: "social media gives legions of idiots the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner."

Turning to the local context of the topic, Mob Censorship is today present more than ever before in Kosovo. Influenced by populist discourse and a clear "Post-Truth" situation—which, according to the Oxford dictionary, is defined as a circumstance in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeal and personal beliefs—attacks, lynchings, and threats against journalists have multiplied

in recent years. This is observed especially in the run-up to elections or during electoral campaigns, when the mass is more agitated and more active. As a consequence, press freedom as a distinctive value in Kosovo is called into question.

Therefore, focusing on the local level, the aim of this paper is to examine and analyze the forms and the impact of Mob Censorship against journalists in Kosovo during the 2025 parliamentary election campaign, from which the following research questions arise:

What are the principal forms used to attack journalists in the course of their professional work?

How does Mob Censorship affect the work of journalists in Kosovo?

## **Literature Review**

In the age of the digital revolution, the journalism profession is undergoing a dramatic transformation that is redefining the fundamental rules of its practice. In this period of technological and informational shifts, it faces a tension between the emancipatory potential of digital tools and the structural threats that jeopardize its democratic function. According to Posetti (2018), journalists today encounter a new battleground where threats to freedom of expression and personal safety take forms unprecedented in the history of media. This condition is not merely a professional challenge; it is an existential transformation that is reshaping the very nature of journalism.

At the heart of this transformation lies the still-opaque phenomenon of online mob censorship, which Waisbord (2020) describes as a new, organized form of suppressing expression. Unlike traditional censorship, this variant does not descend from above—from governments or institutions—but rises like a wave from the depths of the internet, where coordinated groups or uncontrolled crowds turn into self-appointed police of free expression. In this scenario, any individual armed with a mobile device and a social media account can become a potential censor, rendering the journalist not only under constant surveillance but also an unprotected target, exposed to defamation and threats.

This phenomenon is not merely a technical development. It is a revolution in the dynamics of communication. As DeNardis (2014) observes, the concept of censorship has undergone a radical transformation, shifting from a vertical “top-down” model to a horizontal “bottom-up” model (Roberts, 2018). This change is not accidental: it reflects even broader political shifts of our era, in which populism (Moffitt, 2016) and the age of post-truth (McIntyre, 2018) have uprooted traditional norms of public communication.

In this context, social platforms have created a dangerous paradox: they have democratized free expression by giving a voice to every individual, but, as Waisbord (2020) notes, they have also “normalized” censorship, transforming it from a state instrument into a weapon in the hands of digital crowds. The result is a new kind of distributed autocracy, in which the loudest voices—though not necessarily the most just—shape the shared

reality.

At the local level, Kosovo is not exempt from these global trends; it is a vivid and concrete example. The alarming statistics on the rise of online attacks against journalists are not merely numbers, but symptoms of a deeper social illness that manifests daily in digital life. This phenomenon has coincided with a particular political period, reminding us that extreme polarization (Tucker et al., 2018) and the demonization of the media (Waisbord, 2018) are not merely academic debates, but realities that directly affect the lives of journalists.

In this context, journalism is facing not merely a new challenge, but an existential crisis that questions its identity as a pillar of democracy. How will it respond? This question is not merely academic; its answer will shape the future of public discourse in our societies.

## **Censorship**

Censorship has accompanied the development of societies since antiquity, taking different forms depending on the historical and social context. It has served as a mechanism for controlling information and maintaining political, moral, or religious order. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2023), censorship is defined as “the official control of the content of expression before it is published or disseminated.” However, this formal definition does not capture the full complexity of the phenomenon, which, according to Staiger (2005), must be examined through a multidisciplinary approach that includes history, political science, sociology, and media studies.

Since antiquity, philosophers such as Plato defended the need for censorship to preserve social order (Jowett, 1871/2012), whereas John Stuart Mill (1859, 2001) opposed it, emphasizing that truth can be attained only through the free exchange of ideas. This debate has profoundly shaped the perception of censorship in modern societies.

In the modern period, censorship has taken on more sophisticated forms. Michel Foucault (1975/2012) views it not merely as the prohibition of information, but as a mechanism of power that constructs and maintains social norms. This perspective is essential for understanding the functioning of censorship in democratic societies, where it often appears in invisible and normalized forms.

In the twentieth century, totalitarian regimes developed sophisticated systems of censorship. Hannah Arendt (1951/2017) documents how these regimes used censorship not only to suppress the truth, but to construct an alternative reality. In the Soviet Union, for example, censorship reached high levels of sophistication through the practices of samizdat (literature secretly circulated in defiance of the communist regime of the time in the former USSR) (Stelmakh, 1993). During the same period, censorship was equally active in Albania and Kosovo, countries that were likewise living under communist dictatorships. Extreme isolation and total control of every form of expression turned Albania into an ideological vault. Literature, art, and the media were merely instruments of propaganda, while any criticism

was punished with imprisonment or execution. Only after 1991 did the country begin to free itself from Stalinist censorship, leaving behind a heavy legacy of oppression. Meanwhile, under Tito's regime, Kosovo experienced harsh censorship aimed at suppressing Albanian identity. The media and education were controlled by Belgrade, while any demand for national rights was met with repressive measures. Following the 1981 demonstrations, censorship escalated to paranoid levels, pushing Albanians toward clandestine resistance.

In democracies, censorship takes more complex forms. Chomsky and Herman (1988/2008), in *Manufacturing Consent*, present the "propaganda model," which consists of five filters (media ownership, funding, sources of information, advertising pressure, and ideology) that control the information reaching the public. This model shows that in democratic societies, censorship is often implemented indirectly through market mechanisms and power structures.

### **Self-censorship**

Self-censorship is a complex and widespread phenomenon in human communication, in which individuals or media actors voluntarily restrict their expressions due to internal and external influences. It involves the interaction between individual freedom of expression and the pressures of the social, professional, or political environment. According to Waisbord (2020), self-censorship is a form of adaptation to structured constraints, whereby media actors adjust to unarticulated norms in order to preserve their security or advantages. This phenomenon is not new, but in today's global context—where freedom of expression is regarded as a cornerstone of democracy—self-censorship requires deeper analysis to understand its causes and consequences.

Self-censorship differs from external censorship because it is an internal process of regulating expression. As Çipuri (2015) defines it, self-censorship is an act of compromise within the creative personality's inner will, undertaken to adapt to the conjunctural contexts of power in order to remain "correct" with the politics of the day. Goffman (1959/1990) connects it to the Theory of Self-Presentation, in which individuals modify their behavior to align with others' expectations and to maintain a public image. This shows that self-censorship is not only a reaction to external threats, but also a way of managing social relations. However, when it becomes widespread, it can have serious consequences for society.

The causes of self-censorship are diverse and intertwine psychological, social, political, and economic factors. In authoritarian contexts, self-censorship often serves as a survival mechanism. In repressive regimes such as China and Russia, journalists systematically avoid topics that may be interpreted as critical of the government due to the risk of arrest or sanctions. On the economic level, McChesney (2018) argues that media outlets dependent on advertising or powerful sponsors tend to avoid controversial topics that could jeopardize their relationships with funding sources. This is particularly evident in commercial media in the United

States, where critical reporting on large corporations is minimal due to financial dependency.

Journalism is one of the fields where self-censorship has the most severe consequences, threatening the essential role of the media as “guardians of democracy.” Waisbord (2020) emphasizes that when journalists self-restrict, important information does not reach the public, creating a “chilling effect.” This phenomenon is particularly evident in contexts where the media operate under high political pressure.

Another consequence of self-censorship in the media is the loss of diversity of opinions. O’Neil (2017) argues that when journalists self-restrict, the media become increasingly biased, creating a distorted reality for the public.

### **Crowds – the psychology and dynamics of crowds**

Crowds have attracted the attention of social science scholars for more than a century. When people gather in large numbers, they exhibit behaviors that differ fundamentally from those shown at the individual level.

Gustave Le Bon, one of the pioneers of crowd studies, in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895/2024), argues that within a crowd individuals undergo a profound psychological transformation: they partially lose their individual consciousness and become more susceptible to the emotional influence of the group. He describes this as a kind of “collective hypnosis,” in which people act more from emotion and less from reasoning.

Sigmund Freud, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921/2011), develops and deepens Le Bon’s ideas. He focuses on the psychological bond between the members of the crowd and the leader. According to Freud, the crowd forms a strong emotional attachment that gives its members a shared identity and unconditional obedience to leadership. This explains why crowds may follow charismatic figures without question, even when those figures lead them toward actions that, as individuals, they would avoid.

Reinforcing the first two thinkers, Canetti (1960/1984) approaches the topic from an anthropological and philosophical perspective. He views the crowd as an entity that seeks endless growth and, at its peak, dissolves the boundaries between individuals. He describes how people within a crowd experience a release from everyday constraints, which often leads to extreme behavior.

In the modern period, scholars have advanced the understanding of crowds through more rigorous scientific approaches. Moscovici (1981) argues that crowds are not passive clusters, but active forces capable of transforming society, emphasizing the role of communication and propaganda in shaping behavior; an idea, even an implausible one, can become reality if the crowd believes in it and repeats it with passion.

One of the most extensively studied aspects of crowd behavior is its relationship with violence. Contrary to the widespread perception that crowds are irrational and uncontrollable, Stott and Reicher (1998) argue

that violence is not the result of “crowd madness,” but emerges from the interaction between perceptions of injustice and the responses of authorities. They contend that violence often begins when the crowd perceives itself as being oppressed by law enforcement.

### **Mob Censorship**

In the age of social media and global communication, a new and troubling phenomenon is taking shape: Mob Censorship. This term refers to the practice in which organized groups on the internet use coordinated strategies to suppress or eliminate content from digital platforms.

One form of indirect censorship occurs when organized crowds or internet users exploit digital platforms to silence critics through coordinated intimidation tactics, including personal attacks, the dissemination of private data, mass insults, and threats. Waisbord (2020).

According to Waisbord (2020), this phenomenon represents “a radical transformation in the dynamics of power in mass communication, where the control of discourse shifts from traditional actors to digitalized crowds.” This shift has profound implications for democracy and freedom of expression, creating an ecosystem in which independent voices are increasingly marginalized. Attacks carried out through social media—namely Mob Censorship directed at journalists—have become a frequent occurrence, undermining everyday online communication.

At its core, Mob Censorship manifests through several mechanisms that have evolved alongside technological developments. According to Tufekci (2017), “the algorithms of social platforms have made it possible to coordinate attacks on an unprecedented scale.” One of the most widespread mechanisms is mass reporting, in which organized groups use platform reporting functions to trigger the automatic removal of content. This often occurs without thorough evaluation by human moderators, making the system vulnerable to abuse.

Another mechanism is brigading, in which coordinated groups leverage their numbers to manipulate platform algorithms, pushing their own content to the top of discussions and suppressing opposing viewpoints (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). It is often accompanied by doxing (the exposure of personal data) and harassment (mass intimidation), creating a toxic environment that pressures users into self-censorship (Citron, 2014).

A critical dimension of this phenomenon is the role of platforms in enabling these practices. According to Gillespie (2018), “content moderation on platforms is designed to highlight the quantity, not the quality, of reports.” This creates a system in which coordinated attacks are highly effective, as algorithms do not distinguish between genuine reports and coordinated ones.

Kaye et al. (2022) show that social platforms exhibit “automation bias,” relying excessively on AI-driven moderation despite frequent errors. For example, in 2021 Twitter was criticized for the automatic removal of posts by journalists who were critical of a government’s policies, after those posts were mass-reported by coordinated users.

The causes of this phenomenon are diverse and reflect structural changes in mass communication. According to Couldry and Hepp (2017), “social media have centralized power in ways that allow small groups to exert influence comparable to that of traditional media” (p. 156). This shift in the dynamics of power has opened new opportunities for organized censorship.

A key factor is political polarization. According to Sunstein (2018), “extreme political divisions on the internet have created an environment in which groups are increasingly willing to use any means to suppress opposing voices” (p. 67). This is illustrated by Polyakova (2020), who describes how “troll farms” in Russia operate in a coordinated manner to attack independent journalists and critics of the government.

On the other hand, the rise of “cancel culture” has added a new dimension to this phenomenon. Online crowds increasingly and rapidly initiate boycott measures against individuals who express views considered undesirable. This has created a culture of fear, in which many intellectuals and artists are compelled to remain silent due to the pressure exerted by digital crowds.

The consequences of this phenomenon in mass communication are profound. According to McChesney (2019), “Mob Censorship is rewriting the rules of digital journalism, creating an environment in which self-censorship has become an essential tool for professional survival” (p. 122). This is particularly evident in reporting on controversial issues, where journalists face coordinated attacks when covering sensitive topics.

Another aspect is the impact on the diversity of information. According to Neuman et al. (2020), “the effect of crowd-based censorship is the creation of a media ecosystem in which only ‘safe’ content reaches a wide audience” (p. 89). This leads to a narrowing of the deliberative space and an impoverishment of public dialogue, thereby threatening deliberative democracy (Habermas, 2021).

This form of censorship can undermine journalistic ideals of objectivity, as journalists may feel pressured to adapt their reporting to the dominant opinion in order to avoid criticism (Lind, 2023). Lind (2023) shows that this phenomenon is present even in well-established democracies such as Sweden, noting that “Mob Censorship is not merely a security problem for journalists, but a threat to democracy, as it distorts the flow of information.” Nearly one-third of Swedish journalists have received threats, and one-quarter have avoided certain topics due to fear of attacks (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016).

In the face of these challenges, new approaches are required. According to Benkler (2021), “platforms must develop more sophisticated verification mechanisms to distinguish genuine reports from coordinated ones” (p. 156). This includes: the use of artificial intelligence to identify patterns of coordinated reporting (Diakopoulos, 2022), the revision of moderation policies through deeper human assessment (Gorwa, 2019), and greater transparency in platform decision-making (Klonick, 2020).

User education is a crucial step. According to Jenkins et al. (2020),

“educating internet users to recognize and confront the tactics of crowd-based censorship is essential for preserving the democratic online space” (p. 134). This includes media literacy training, which helps users distinguish between conscientious criticism and coordinated attacks (Hobbs, 2021), as well as the protection of journalists and activists from digital crowd assaults (Posetti, 2022).

### **Intimidation of Journalists**

The intimidation of journalists is a systematic threat to freedom of expression and the functioning of the media in a democratic society. It is not limited to sporadic attacks against individuals, but has a structural and recurring nature that undermines journalists’ ability to perform their duties independently and safely.

The effects of intimidation are multifaceted. First, it impacts the psychological well-being of journalists. Posetti et al. (2021), in a study conducted in collaboration with UNESCO, found that 73% of women journalists from 125 countries had experienced online violence, while 20% had altered their reporting style and content due to threats. This situation creates a climate of fear, self-isolation, and, in extreme cases, withdrawal from the profession.

Second, intimidation undermines professional collaboration. According to Clark and Grech (2017), in high-risk countries collaboration among journalists decreases by more than 40%, directly affecting networks of information and experience sharing. This erosion of solidarity facilitates individual isolation and weakens the collective capacity of the media to confront threats.

Third, intimidation affects the type of information that is published. Journalists under constant pressure avoid high-risk topics—corruption, gender-based violence, the rights of marginalized communities, organized crime—to evade hostile reactions. This chilling effect creates gaps in public discourse and “dark zones” within the informational ecosystem.

Journalists today face threats and risks in many countries, where the type of state and the political or social situation leave them unprotected. In states experiencing armed conflict, they are often targeted by warring parties, facing a constant risk of capture, abduction, or murder. In authoritarian countries, criticism is not tolerated, and repressive laws are used to silence them, either by imprisoning them or forcing them into exile.

Even in some developing democracies with weak judicial systems and widespread corruption, journalists who uncover inconvenient truths face threats from powerful politicians or businessmen. Although outside the context of war, they confront an invisible battle in which their words may cost them their freedom or even their lives.

In certain cases, intimidation and attacks against journalists also occur in developed liberal democracies. Lind’s (2023) study in Sweden shows that intimidation is not confined to authoritarian states; even there, journalists face significant threats, particularly when covering sensitive issues that challenge dominant narratives. According to Lind (2023), about one-third

of Swedish journalists have received repeated threats, and one-quarter have modified their content to avoid clashes with digital crowds.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon of Mob Censorship against journalists in Kosovo during the 2025 electoral campaign. As Braun and Clarke (2006) observe, the qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena in which context and subjective experience are essential. This approach enables an in-depth and contextual understanding of journalists’ experiences, capturing the intricate nuances of this social and political phenomenon. Unlike quantitative research, which aims at measurement and generalization of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this study focuses on the interpretation of individual narratives to uncover the motives, impacts, and strategies used by journalists to confront these attacks.

The participants consist of ten Kosovar journalists active in covering the 2025 electoral campaign, all of whom have experienced online attacks in the form of Mob Censorship. According to the predetermined criteria, five online journalists/editors and five journalists who, in their professional capacity, are invited as commentators on television programs—and who have experienced or witnessed online censorship—were selected. Of the total number, two are women. Two of the ten participants, one man and one woman, are local journalists from two smaller cities in Kosovo. The interviewees are identified in the study by the labels Journalist 1 through Journalist 10.

**Table 1**  
Demographic and Professional Data of the Interviewees.

Interviewee	Position	National/Local Level	Gender	Age	Experience
Journalist1	Commentator	National	F	35	7
Journalist2	Editor / Commentator	National	M	45	18
Journalist3	Journalist	Local	M	30	8
Journalist4	Journalist	National	M	40	13
Journalist5	Editor / Commentator	National	M	42	16
Journalist6	Editor / Commentator	National	M	37	13
Journalist7	Journalist	Local	F	46	17
Journalist8	Commentator	National	M	61	20
Journalist9	Journalist	National	M	60	40
Journalist10	Journalist/ Commentator	National	M	45	22

Note. F = Female; M = Male. Experience is expressed in years.

The selection of participants was carried out through purposive sampling, a technique that, according to Patton (2002), allows for the identification of individuals who provide rich information about the phenomenon under study. This approach enables the collection of in-depth data from

individuals with diverse perspectives—based on their working medium (TV or online), political orientation, and personal experience with online attacks—following the principles of qualitative research described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), balance clear structure with the flexibility to explore unexpected topics. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes—an interview length recommended by Seidman (2019)—and was conducted face-to-face with each participant. With the full consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis, following the ethical protocols outlined by Israel and Hay (2006).

The interview questions were formulated to capture five key dimensions of the phenomenon:

**Exposure to Mob Censorship**, to document the frequency, forms, and patterns of the attacks.

**The motivation and strategies of the attackers**, to investigate the organized and coordinated nature of the assaults.

**The impact of the attacks on journalists' professional and personal lives**, to assess their emotional and professional consequences.

**The response of institutions and social media platforms**, to analyze the effectiveness of protection and reporting systems.

**Concrete ideas for addressing or at least mitigating the phenomenon**, to gather recommendations from the actors themselves.

After transcription and multiple readings, Thematic Analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006), using an inductive (data-driven) approach. This means that the codes and themes were not predetermined by any theoretical framework but emerged organically from the content of the journalists' responses.

The coding process was iterative, involving repeated cycles and revisions; each response was analyzed line by line for key ideas and core concepts.

Through this approach, the study captured the lived reality of journalists, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data and providing an authentic, field-grounded understanding of Mob Censorship in Kosovo.

Although the study offers an in-depth account of journalists' experiences, it has several limitations.

**Non-generalizability:** The qualitative nature of the study and the limited number of purposively selected participants do not allow for broad statistical generalizations. The experiences of the ten journalists may not fully represent the entire media sector in Kosovo.

**Memory bias and subjectivity:** Recall may be biased, as online attacks generate strong emotions and may not be remembered accurately—a challenge noted by Tracy (2010). Reliance on subjective accounts can result in different interpretations of the same situations.

**Dynamic and complex context:** Kosovo's political and social context

presents challenges. Saliu and Tafa (2026) argue that in Kosovo digital crowds on social media can pressure journalists through harassment and coordinated criticism, which may lead to self-censorship and challenges to media freedom. The electoral campaign may have heightened polarization, influencing the perception/reporting of attacks (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Despite its limitations, the value of the study lies in the depth of the qualitative data it provides. Through detailed interviews, it captures the nuances of individual experiences, including journalists' strategies for confronting attacks, the emotional impact, and the ways in which their news coverage has been affected. This makes the study particularly useful for understanding not only the phenomenon of Mob Censorship, but also how journalists and institutions can prepare to address similar challenges, in line with Maxwell's (2013) recommendations on the practical value of qualitative research.

## **Results**

According to the interviewed journalists, the attacks directed at them are not random criticisms but organized and coordinated actions. A distinctive characteristic is the visible coordination among profiles that become active within minutes of the publication of critical content. One of them described this as follows: "The attacks are coordinated and very personal, with an emphasis on my gender" (Journalist 1). This pattern indicates that the actions are not spontaneous but planned, demonstrating the presence of an organizational structure. Another journalist referred to this as "an organized crowd attack, not merely criticism" (Journalist 2).

The mobilization mechanism among attackers is predictable and rapid. Journalists observe that when they criticize the government, it is as if they trigger an alarm button. "The pattern is the same: 'mark the target' and 'mobilize the crowd'" (Journalist 2). This hierarchical and coordinated mechanism is seen by some as clearly directed by structures of power: "They come from the ruling party's militants. When I post something, they receive the order to attack me" (Journalist 6).

Another technological aspect of this mechanism is the use of bots to amplify attacks and create an artificial perception of consensus against critical journalists (Journalist 4).

The shift of organized attacks toward visual platforms, especially TikTok, is a notable trend. This platform is increasingly viewed as problematic due to the speed and viral nature of its content. "TikTok is becoming increasingly problematic; edited videos and memes that slander in a degrading manner are published there" (Journalist 1). Attackers post short videos in which journalists' statements are taken out of context or edited to create misleading narratives (Journalist 2).

Visual manipulation has reached a high level of sophistication: the attacks include edited videos with dramatic music and defamatory text, as well as degrading memes and caricatures. "Edited videos with dramatic music and slanderous text can cause major damage within hours" (Journalist 4). A widespread technique is context distortion, in which

authentic fragments of a journalist's material are cut and repurposed to create a distorted message. "They use words from my reports, cut them, and use them against me, adding sexist language" (Journalist 7).

According to most journalists, the primary source of these coordinated attacks is linked to the government and its structures. A common pattern is that attacks intensify immediately after criticism of those in power. "When I criticize the government, within minutes an entire network of profiles begins the attack" (Journalist 1). This mechanism is described as "100% politically organized" (Journalist 2).

According to the interviewees, the strategic goal is not to win the debate, but to silence the critical voice and create a climate of fear. "It is a way to silence the critical voice" (Journalist 2). The ultimate aim is to undermine journalists' credibility and intimidate them, creating a form of indirect censorship that controls public information (Journalist 4).

Facebook remains the primary platform for the dissemination of coordinated attacks, due to its widespread reach and structures that facilitate collective actions. "Facebook is the main platform, followed by Twitter for harsher threats" (Journalist 1). Meanwhile, the importance of TikTok is rapidly increasing because of its algorithm and the effectiveness of visual content. "I'm noticing a shift in the focus of organized attacks toward more visual platforms, such as TikTok" (Journalist 5).

Closed platforms such as Telegram and private groups serve as "backstage" spaces for coordinating attacks before they are disseminated on the main platforms. "Even in closed Telegram groups" (Journalist 2).

Based on the interviewees' statements, platform algorithms play a decisive role in amplifying the attacks. The TikTok algorithm, which favors conflict-driven content, gives artificial prominence to toxic profiles. "Because of their algorithm, such posts spread quickly and reach a massively new audience" (Journalist 1). This algorithmic design encourages the widespread dissemination of manipulated content.

The speed of dissemination is an alarming characteristic of these attacks. Due to their viral nature and algorithmic amplification, damage can occur within hours, or even minutes, making timely response and mitigation extremely difficult. "Edited videos... can cause major damage within hours and are extremely difficult to remove" (Journalist 4).

Journalists state that the continuous and coordinated attacks have a severe psychological impact, creating chronic stress and a constant sense of being watched. "It affects my mental health a lot. It is constant stress" (Journalist 1). As a result, feelings of vulnerability and isolation are widespread, especially among journalists who work in relative isolation.

The study shows that this impact often extends into personal life. Especially for women journalists and those working in smaller towns, the attacks take on an even more immediate and tangible dimension. "As a woman and a journalist in the region, the attacks are twofold: sexist and political... In small towns, the threats feel even more real" (Journalist 7).

Confronting these attacks forces journalists to increase their caution in daily work. This is reflected in enhanced fact-checking and particular

attention to wording in order to avoid extreme interpretations. “We are more aware and careful, especially in fact-checking” (Journalist 4).

A resistant, defensive, and oppositional response is evident among many of them. The intensity of the attacks often serves as confirmation that they are doing their job properly, reinforcing their determination to continue. “Not at all. In fact, it makes me more determined... The more they attack me, the more I know I am doing something right” (Journalist 2 and Journalist 6).

The most widespread defense strategy is reducing personal online exposure. Journalists drastically limit their private content, hide personal information, and block attacking profiles in masse. “I have drastically reduced my personal use. I no longer post anything private, only news” (Journalist 1).

Some journalists adopt a more active approach: direct confrontation with attackers through rapid blocking and public exposure of their methods. This approach is grounded in the principle that attacks lose power when they are exposed. “I have become even more active. I block them immediately and expose them” (Journalist 6).

The platforms’ response to reports is described as ineffective and automated. Journalists state that they receive standardized replies that do not acknowledge the coordinated nature of the violation. “The response is always automatic: “This does not violate our standards”” (Journalist 1).

A fundamental problem is the lack of contextual moderation: there are no moderators who understand Albanian and the Kosovar reality, which leads to systematic failures in identifying actual violations. “They need to have moderators who understand the local context and our language, not people making decisions from Ireland or India” (Journalist 3).

The lack of concrete institutional support is a recurring and problematic issue for many journalists. Reporting procedures are lengthy and ill-defined, creating distrust among journalists. “I have not reported them to the authorities; I don’t believe anything will happen” (Journalist 1). Meanwhile, the role of professional organizations, such as the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK), remains largely declarative, leaving a vacuum in practical protection (Journalist 1 and Journalist 4).

The situation of journalists in the regions is particularly difficult. They feel more isolated and have limited access to support. “More attention and support for regional journalists!” (Journalist 3). In small communities, the attacks take on a deeper personal dimension, and the threats feel more real due to physical proximity, increasing the perceived risk. “Here the attacks are more direct and more personal, because we all know each other” (Journalist 3).

The main demand directed toward the platforms is investment in contextual moderation in Albanian and the improvement of response speed. “They need to invest in moderation in the Albanian language” (Journalist 1). A fundamental change is also required: coordinated attacks should be treated as organized service violations, leading to the removal of entire networks, not just individual profiles (Journalist 4).

Journalists emphasize the importance of psychological resilience and not being intimidated as personal strategies. “Journalists need to be strong and not afraid” (Journalist 2). Equally vital is the continuous education of journalists on protection tools and that of the public on the mechanisms of Mob Censorship, in order to build immunity against manipulation (Journalist 5 and Journalist 10).

Ultimately, a coordinated interinstitutional approach is required. This entails close cooperation between the media, professional organizations, platforms, and authorities in developing effective shared strategies and protocols. “A coordinated strategy between the media, media NGOs, platforms, and authorities is needed” (Journalist 4). The development of specialized tools and protocols for rapid protection of journalists is an essential step in combating this complex phenomenon.

## **Discussion**

This discussion integrates the empirical findings of the study in Kosovo with communication and media studies theories, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the coordinated online attacks against journalists during electoral periods. The qualitative analysis reveals a complex ecosystem in which Mob Censorship is exploited as a political tool for controlling public discourse, while the literature review provides a theoretical framework for interpreting the mechanisms, impacts, and systematic non-responses.

The interview findings emphasize that the attacks are not spontaneous but coordinated and synchronized, beginning within minutes of the publication of critical content. This aligns with Waisbord (2020), who defines this phenomenon as “a form of indirect censorship in which organized crowds exploit digital platforms to silence critics.” In Kosovo, this coordination is directly linked to political structures; journalists report that the attacks “come from the ruling party’s militants.” This confirms the findings of other studies regarding the use of “troll farms” in political contexts to suppress critical voices.

The study reveals that platforms such as Facebook and TikTok play a key role in the dissemination of attacks, primarily because their algorithms favor conflict-driven content. This aligns with Tufekci (2017), who notes that “the algorithms of social platforms have made it possible to coordinate attacks on an unprecedented scale.” Moreover, the platforms’ lack of response to journalists’ reports reflects the “automation bias” documented by Kaye et al. (2022), whereby platforms rely excessively on automated systems while ignoring local context and the coordinated nature of the attacks.

The phenomenon in Kosovo has shifted from textual attacks to audiovisual ones, with widespread use of TikTok for edited videos and degrading memes. This aligns with global trends documented by Gillespie (2018), who observes that platforms have become “new censorial mechanisms” through various practices. Moreover, the out-of-context use of journalists’ authentic materials reinforces manipulation by making defamation appear more “credible” to the public—a tactic widely

documented in the modern disinformation literature.

The emotional impact of continuous attacks is profound, producing constant stress and a sense of vulnerability. This mirrors global studies showing that a high percentage of women journalists have experienced online violence and have altered their reporting practices. In Kosovo, this translates into two strategies: a reduction of personal online presence/self-censorship, and, on the other hand, a determination to continue through active responses. This dynamic illustrates the tension between the chilling effect and resistance as a form of public awareness.

The findings show that neither social platforms, nor state institutions, nor professional organizations provide adequate protection for journalists. This confirms that Mob Censorship creates a “radical transformation in the dynamics of power,” in which traditional protection actors fail. Particularly alarming is the situation of regional journalists, who face higher and more personal risks, highlighting structural inequalities within the protection ecosystem.

The study’s recommendations—contextual moderation, rapid responses, network-level enforcement, and public education—align with the demands of scholars in the field. Some authors call for “more sophisticated verification mechanisms,” while others emphasize media literacy as a tool to combat manipulation. In Kosovo, moderation that understands the local context is particularly important, requiring comprehension of local, linguistic, and political nuances—a fundamental condition for effective moderation.

Coordinated online attacks against journalists in Kosovo during electoral periods represent a concrete manifestation of Mob Censorship within a developing democratic context. These attacks are not merely random expressions of hostility, but a politically organized mechanism, reinforced by platform algorithms and facilitated by institutional non-response. The study’s findings confirm and deepen theories of digital censorship, demonstrating that even in emerging democracies this phenomenon can be exploited as a political weapon to control public discourse and silence critical voices.

## **Conclusions**

This study analyzes coordinated online attacks against journalists in Kosovo, revealing a complex phenomenon of Mob Censorship that threatens media freedom. Interviews with journalists show that many attacks are coordinated rather than spontaneous. They often begin minutes after critical content is published and involve multiple profiles acting simultaneously, suggesting organized networks. Automated accounts (bots) further amplify these attacks by creating the impression of broad public opposition to targeted journalists.

Not all attacks are planned. Some emerge spontaneously from a wider anti-media narrative shaped in a post-truth environment by political actors, particularly those linked to the ruling party.

The study shows that Mob Censorship has evolved from simple textual

attacks into sophisticated multimedia campaigns. Visual platforms such as TikTok have become central due to their algorithms and rapid content diffusion. Manipulated videos, misleading thumbnails, dramatic music, and degrading memes are increasingly used to discredit journalists. A particularly concerning tactic is the use of journalists' authentic materials taken out of context to construct false but seemingly credible narratives.

Many attacks also appear politically motivated, intensifying after criticism of the government or ruling party. The aim is not to win public debate but to intimidate journalists through personal attacks, reputational damage, and the creation of a climate of fear—representing a form of indirect censorship.

Different platforms play specific roles in this ecosystem. Facebook remains the main channel for mass dissemination, Twitter is often used for threats, while TikTok spreads manipulated audiovisual content. Closed platforms such as Telegram serve as spaces where attacks are coordinated.

Platform algorithms significantly amplify these attacks. Systems designed to maximize engagement tend to prioritize polarizing content, giving greater visibility to toxic profiles. Combined with coordinated actions, this allows harmful content to spread rapidly and cause reputational damage within hours.

The psychological impact on journalists is considerable. Continuous attacks create stress, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of constant surveillance, often extending into journalists' personal lives—especially for women and regional journalists working in small communities.

Professionally, journalists respond with both caution and determination. Many increase fact-checking and editorial scrutiny, although this requires greater time and emotional effort. At the same time, some view the attacks as confirmation of the importance of their work.

Journalists adopt different coping strategies, from reducing their personal online presence to directly confronting attackers by blocking profiles and exposing harassment.

A major concern is the weak response from both platforms and institutions. Reporting systems on social media are often perceived as ineffective and automated, failing to recognize coordinated attacks. The lack of moderators who understand the Albanian language and Kosovo's context further limits intervention. Institutional support is also viewed as insufficient, contributing to deep distrust among journalists.

The study also highlights disparities between central and regional journalists. Those working in smaller communities face higher risks due to limited support and the more personal nature of attacks.

Addressing Mob Censorship requires a multidimensional response. Platforms should invest in contextual moderation and treat coordinated harassment as organized violations. Journalists emphasize the importance of psychological resilience and training in digital protection tools, while broader public education is necessary to strengthen societal awareness and resistance to coordinated harassment and disinformation.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design and small sample of ten purposively selected journalists limit the possibility of generalizing the findings to the entire media sector in Kosovo. Second, the data rely on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by subjectivity and recall bias. Finally, because the research was conducted during the 2025 electoral campaign, the heightened political polarization of this period may have influenced the frequency and perception of online attacks.

## Recommendations

Given the limited scholarly and institutional attention to Mob Censorship, this study proposes several key recommendations.

Police and prosecution should establish a rapid-response mechanism to investigate coordinated online attacks against journalists, while courts should prioritize such cases to signal zero tolerance for this form of censorship. Institutions should also provide legal, psychological, and basic security support for targeted journalists, particularly in regional areas.

Journalists should publicly denounce coordinated attacks rather than confront them individually. The Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK) should create a centralized system for reporting and documenting attacks and for communicating with online platforms. AGK should also advocate stronger platform responsibility for coordinated harassment in the Albanian language.

Finally, future research should further examine the actors and motivations behind Mob Censorship.

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