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ONLINE EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM RESEARCHERS' SECURITY, SAFETY, AND RESILIENCE:

FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD

Elizabeth Pearson, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova and Maura Conway

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About the authors

Elizabeth Pearson is a Lecturer in Criminology with the Conflict, Violence and Terrorism Research Centre at Royal Holloway, University of London, and an associate fellow with the Royal United Services Institute and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. She is a co-author of *Countering Violent Extremism: Making Gender Matter* (2021). Her book *Extreme Britain: Gender, Masculinity and Radicalisation* will be published by Hurst in 2023.

Joe Whittaker is a Lecturer in Cyber Threats at Swansea University. His PhD analysed the online behaviours of Islamic State terrorists in the US from the years 2012–2018, conducted as a joint degree with Swansea University and Leiden University. He has also researched how social media platforms' recommendation systems promote and amplify extreme far-right content, as well as publishing on topics such as counter-narratives and extremist video games.

Till Baaken is a Senior Projects and Development Manager at ISD Germany, focusing on right-wing extremism and Islamism, as well as disinformation and conspiracy theories in German-speaking and English-speaking countries. His articles have been published in a range of publications, including the Journal for Deradicalization and the International Journal of Conflict and Violence. He has also contributed to several books and handbooks on radicalisation and de-radicalisation.

Sara Zeiger's subject matter expertise is in detecting and preventing violent extremist groups and criminal organizations from disseminating their messages online. She was previously the Program Manager, Department of Research and Analysis at Hedayah. Her publications include research on ISIS' education system, technology and CVE, the role of women in CVE, and counter-narratives against violent extremist groups. She holds a M.A. in International Relations and Religion from Boston University, and graduated valedictorian from Ohio Northern University with a B.A. in Psychology and Religion.

Farangiz Atamuradova is a researcher working on various CVE related issues as well as political analysis. She is a Program Officer in the Research and Analysis Department at Hedeyah, where she leads and supports a number of department's projects and programs. Prior to Hedayah, Farangiz worked at Delma Institute as a political analyst covering the Gulf, Central Asia, and Russia.

Maura Conway is Paddy Moriarty Professor of Government and International Studies in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University (DCU); Professor of Cyber Threats in CYTREC at Swansea University, UK; and was founding Coordinator of VOX-Pol. Prof. Conway's principal research interests are in the area of terrorism and the Internet, including cyberterrorism, the functioning and effectiveness of extremist and terrorist online content, and online radicalisation.
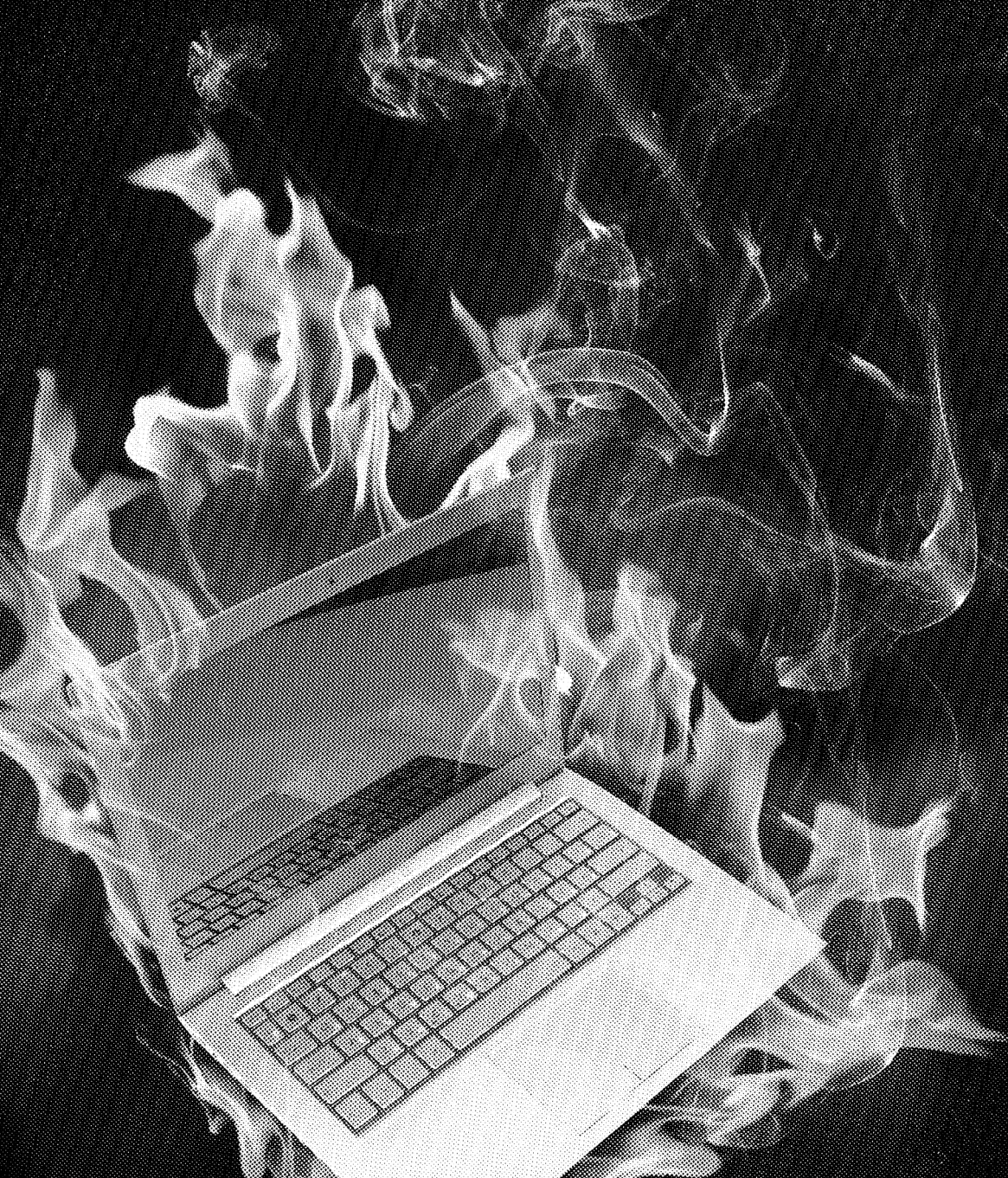
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from the REASSURE (Researcher, Security, Safety, and Resilience) project's in-depth interviews with 39 online extremism and terrorism researchers. Based at universities, research institutes, and think tanks in Europe and North America, the interviewees studied mainly, albeit not exclusively, far-right and violent jihadist online activity. The report catalogues for the first time the range of harms they have experienced, the lack of formalised systems of care or training, and their reliance therefore on informal support networks to mitigate those harms.

For decades now, extremists and terrorists have used online spaces to propagandise, recruit, plan attacks and even livestream them. Researchers have followed them there, recognising the potential of the Internet as a space in which to observe this activity and gather data. In many ways, working online has made researching extremism and terrorism both easier and safer; still, even online, this research continues to carry risks. In the past, these risks were hardly touched upon within the researcher community. Now, however, the sub-field has evolved, and the challenges of online extremism and terrorism research are increasingly recognised as valid and important subjects for discussion.

This REASSURE report is an important contribution to that discussion. The report has three core concerns: the **harms** faced by online extremism and terrorism researchers; their **coping mechanisms**; and **institutional supports** or the lack thereof. Some **key findings**:

- Interviewees' belief in the critical importance and 'real world' impact of online extremism and terrorism research;

- A third of interviewees did not report harm beyond that of any job;

- Two thirds reported some harms, with more than half saying those harms were significant;

- Almost half of interviewees had had no awareness of the potential risks of researching in this sub-field before beginning their research;

- Nine interviewees reported death threats, some credible;

- More than half of interviewees turned to the community of researchers for help when faced with harm(s), feeling that their work was so specialised, only that community could sufficiently understand their experiences;

- Approximately a third of interviewees had discussed their research with an ethics board, most of them getting the impression that the board's priority focus was institutional protection;

- Identity mattered with regard to harms, with female researchers and researchers of colour affected by their work, or targeted by extremists, in particular ways;

- Junior researchers reported the most harms; in addition, they risked professional harm if, as a protective mechanism, they sought to remove themselves from public spaces (e.g., media appearances, social media).

Unfortunately, few institutions provided adequate formalised training, care, or support for (online) extremism and terrorism researchers. In many, researchers were left to develop their own Do-It-Yourself responses to the risks they faced. And while a handful of institutions did provide protections for 'real world' researchers, despite this they often failed to recognise the online space as a field of study carrying its own risks.

Now is the time for this to change. Online extremism and terrorism researchers want to be involved in creating formal change in universities and other research institutions, to ensure that, going forward, sufficient guidance, training, and support is provided for researchers – especially those new to the sub-field.

A growing body of research demonstrates how people working in other professions, such as journalism, the emergency services, tech companies, and humanitarian organisations, have been damaged

by exposure to violent and/or hateful online content. Employers and professional bodies in these areas have therefore begun to produce, and follow, good practice guidelines to safeguard their employees and members. This report confirms that online extremism and terrorism researchers face many of the same harms.

Harms are not inevitable. Prior knowledge, preparation, andinstitutional responsiveness are key. It is time for universities and think tanks to learn from the work done by journalism bodies, social media companies, and humanitarian agencies, among others, to ensure that those doing online extremism and terrorism research are sufficiently supported and protected. Crucial in this endeavour will be the inclusion of the research community as partners when developing these good practices.

This report is the culmination of Phase One of the REASSURE project. It provides, for the first time, detailed insight into the harms experienced by online extremism and terrorism researchers. Phase Two will increase our learning from others professionally tasked in this area by compiling good practices from these domains and reflecting on how they may be refined and customised for deployment by online extremism and terrorism researchers and their institutions. In REASSURE's final phase, it is planned to produce tailored harm-reduction guidelines for online extremism and terrorism researchers.

2. INTRODUCTION

> *The fact that I can be flicking through pictures of corpses on my phone and then, in less than ten seconds, suddenly be holding my baby... It's just, there's a dissonance there, which I find strange.*

M4, 30s, UK

Live-streamed terrorist attacks, beheadings, corpses, child soldiers. 'Islamic State' photo montages, far-right music videos, misogynist hate forums, terrorist manifestos. Today, it is not necessary to leave one's office to find people involved in extremist or terrorist activities: with just a smartphone, any researcher – indeed, any Internet user – can have a world of extremist and terrorist content at their fingertips.

Extremism and terrorism researchers have always engaged with distressing subject matter. Now more than ever, though, our data are collected online, often via the routine – sometimes daily – manual trawling of extremist and terrorist accounts, groups, chats, and channels for books, magazines, pamphlets, blog posts, forum posts, micro-texts (e.g., tweets), videos, infographics, memes, podcasts, music, and other types of content. Nor are harms arising from exposure to such material the only risks faced by online extremism and terrorism researchers. They are also liable to be targeted by extremists and terrorists, both online and offline, via doxing, trolling, and/or direct personal threats. This type of targeting often ensues from the publication of research or after media appearances, but it can also be triggered by the very act of conducting research.

Online extremism and terrorism research has been going on for at least two decades now: although there was some earlier coverage (Lowe 1985), the academic sub-field had its genesis in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Arquilla, Ronfeldt, and Zanini 1999; Conway 2002; Denning 1999). Despite this, understanding its impacts on the people who collect and analyse data on online extremism and terrorism, and who publish their findings, is a relatively new concern: the research itself first came to prominence in the early 2010s, when the widespread

circulation of the Islamic State's often gruesome online propaganda became evident, but concerns about its impacts on researchers emerged only later (Conway 2021, p.369; King 2018; Krona 2020).

In the last few years, terrorism studies has evolved from being a space in which issues of harm to researchers were not discussed at all, and researchers were left to 'figure things out' for themselves, to one in which researcher welfare is increasingly recognised as a valid and important subject for discussion and for organisational focus. Online extremism and terrorism researchers themselves have been particularly important contributors to this change-making activity (see e.g., Allam 2019; Conway 2021; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021; Winter 2019).

That said, there is as yet little practical guidance to *assist* online extremism and terrorism researchers to remain safe and well while undertaking their work, despite the increasing prevalence of this area of study, including among younger scholars and as part of university courses.

It is time to take practical steps to learn and change. This is where REASSURE (Researcher Security, Safety, and Resilience) has a role to play.

REASSURE's purpose is to enhance the well-being and safety of online extremism and terrorism researchers through active collaboration with the community of scholars in this sub-field, learning from researchers and practitioners in cognate areas and, ultimately, developing tailored guidelines.

This report is the culmination of **Phase One, 'Talking to Researchers'**. It is based on interviews with 39 online extremism and terrorism researchers from universities and think tanks in the UK, Europe, and North America about the welfare challenges they face while researching in this domain, gathering their experiences, detailing their coping mechanisms, and hearing from them about institutional supports.

Phase Two of REASSURE, entitled 'Evolving Good Practice', which is already underway, will consist of active collaboration with (1) others professionally tasked in relation to online extremism and terrorism, including specialist journalists, content moderators, and law enforcement, (2) professionals active in allied areas (e.g., online

child sex abuse, humanitarian aid), and (3) relevant scholars from outside terrorism studies (e.g., Internet researchers, legal scholars). A preliminary workshop attended by representatives from the latter categories was held at Royal Holloway, University of London's central London premises in September 2022; there we discussed our shared – and divergent – experiences of risks, injury, and harms, and available supports. The completion of Phase Two will result in a report in which we compile good practices from adjacent domains and show how they may be refined and customised for deployment by online extremism and terrorism researchers and their institutions.

Finally, in **REASSURE's Phase Three we will produce the REASSURE Guidelines**, an ethics and safety charter tailored for researchers active in the online extremism and terrorism space.

All of those involved in REASSURE – from Swansea University's Cyber Terrorism Research Centre (CYTREC), Dublin City University, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Modus|Zad, and the Conflict, Violence and Terrorism Research Centre (CVTRC) at Royal Holloway, University of London – have themselves engaged in online extremism and terrorism research, individually and as part of broader teams. Aware of the variety of risks attaching to this work, and of the growing collective recognition of those risks, they developed this project out of a desire to document researcher experiences formally, to learn about good practices, and, ultimately, to provide well-informed bespoke guidance for researchers in our sub-field.

A core aim of the present report is to reflect researcher experiences of collecting and analysing online extremism and terrorism data, good and bad. The report documents harms but also defences (i.e., the methods individuals have developed to deal with those harms). Online extremism and terrorism researchers – some of whom have worked in this field for decades – have proved they are resilient and adaptable.

Our interviewees, both newer and more established researchers, were **at pains to point out the importance they attached to their online extremism and terrorism research**, which they viewed as crucial in itself in advancing knowledge as well as having considerable positive 'real world' impacts. Interviewees almost

uniformly believed that the overall benefits of undertaking such research outweighed any personal costs. Their view was that society needs this research, and that it has contributed significantly to understandings of the contemporary contours of online extremism and terrorism, and thus to countering them.

Some colleagues we interviewed believed they **had not been negatively affected to any significant degree** by undertaking work on online terrorism. Having acknowledged this, however, a sizeable cohort of our interviewees related negative experiences arising from their research. These ranged from mild (e.g., Internal Review Boards (IRBs) that were insufficiently knowledgeable or that prolonged ethics approval processes) to severely concerning and disruptive (e.g., death threats from known jihadists).

In fact, these risks and harms are not wholly new. Historically, the terrorism studies sub-field grappled with the challenge of managing the risks faced in offline spaces (e.g., in conflict zones) and learned from the experiences of other professions (Gorriti 1991). Today, there is considerable guidance available for those planning 'traditional' offline field work on extremist and terrorist groups – guidance that covers, among other issues, interview techniques, negotiating with gatekeepers, personal safety routines, and engagement in the field as a woman (Dolnik 2011; Horgan 2012; Kenney 2013; Morrison, Silke, and Bont 2021; Ross 2004).

Of course, many of these issues are not restricted to terrorism studies, or even to security and conflict studies more widely (Chappuis and Krause 2019; Peterson 2002; Wood 2006): they are commonplace, to greater and lesser extents, across the social sciences (Dickson-Swift 2008; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn 2006). This is to say that online extremism and terrorism research has commonalities not just with 'real world' extremism and terrorism research, but also with a variety of other types of social science research (e.g., criminology, sociology). Researchers in these other fields are subject to risks and harms too; the important thing is to determine what the risks and harms obtaining in particular disciplines and sub-fields are, and work to mitigate them.

A crucial component of REASSURE's Phase One, and therefore of this report, is to provide **a baseline knowledge of online extremism and terrorism researchers' lived experiences of risks and harms, the impacts of these on their sense of well-being and careers, individual and collective coping mechanisms, and institutional responses**.

It is worth underlining here that **a researcher does not have to witness violence or trauma directly to be affected by it**. A 2014 study of journalists dealing with user-generated content (UGC) in newsrooms distant from sites of conflict found that many developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Feinstein et al. 2014). Indeed, those sifting digital content potentially witness greater brutality, and at closer proximity, than they would if they were in the field (Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal 2015). Feinstein et al. (2014) note: "[f]requency of exposure to UGC independently and consistently predict[s] multiple indices of psychopathology, be they related to anxiety, depression, PTSD or alcohol consumption" (p.3). The concept of secondary and vicarious trauma is now taken seriously in social media companies,[1] newsrooms, policing, and elsewhere.

Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal's (2015) observation, in a now eight-year-old report, that there is a "failure on the part of both educational institutions and organisations to warn and prepare professionals that they could be faced with distressing imagery before working with eyewitness media" (p.11) may no longer obtain in other settings, but it continues to resonate in universities and other research organisations. In fact, Dubberley and colleagues were referring to the lack of training provided for journalism and other students, but this

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1   This is at least partially due to media reporting and a slew of court cases. See, for example, Newton, Casey, 'The Terror Queue: These Moderators Help Keep Google and YouTube Free of Violent Extremism – And Now Some of Them Have PTSD', *The Verge*, 16 December 2019: www.theverge.com/2019/12/16/21021005/google-youtube-moderators-ptsd-accenture-violent-disturbing-content-interviews-video; Beckett, Jennifer, 'We Need to Talk About the Mental Health of Content Moderators', *The Conversation*, 27 September 2018: http://theconversation.com/we-need-to-talk-about-the-mental-health-of-content-moderators-103830.

lack of training is perhaps unsurprising given that these institutions' own staffs are often similarly rudderless. REASSURE interviewees therefore underlined the need for more guidance in this area and for formalised *institutional* support for online extremism and terrorism researchers, including through the exercise of a duty of care. As the field grows it is becoming increasingly important for researchers, in particular PhD students and early-career researchers (ECRs), not to be alone in carrying the burden of their own safety and well-being.

Part of the problem may be that online spaces are still not regarded as distinct 'fields' of study, including by researchers' institutions. As Conway (2021) put it, "[f]or online extremism and terrorism researchers, the Internet *is* the 'field'" (p.368; italics in original), and this matters when it comes to protections for researchers. Conway follows up by quoting Barratt and Maddox's (2016, p.712) maxim that "the safety of researchers working in digital spaces needs to be properly considered and safeguarded with the same care as is applied to conventional research engagements" (2021, p.368).

Despite the emergence of some good practice, most interviewees reported that their institutions' knowledge of the potential risks and harms arising from online extremism and terrorism research (not just to the institution itself, but to individual researchers), and thus their ability to train for and manage them, was negligible. One upshot of this is the degree to which online extremism and terrorism researchers have developed their own self-care strategies and practices, not all of which appear to be healthy long-term.

Researchers' recourse to their own devices draws our attention to the necessity for us to take a 'nothing about us without us' approach. This idea emerged from the disability rights movement in the 1990s (see Charlton 2000) and has since spread to other groups and movements (see for example Lynch, Windle, and Ahmed 2021). In the context of progressing online extremism and terrorism researchers' security, safety, and resilience, this means researchers and their institutions working *together* to ensure that researcher well-being is appropriately addressed going forward.

3. METHODOLOGY

The report's findings are based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 39 online extremism and/or terrorism researchers working in western universities and think tanks. This section details interviewee selection, interviewee demographics, interview type, key interview topics, issues around naming versus anonymisation, and the study's limitations. Before any attempt was made to contact interviewees, the research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of Swansea University's Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law – an approval that covered all the researchers in the team, across institutions.

3.1 INTERVIEWEE SELECTION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Snowball sampling was used to identify interviewees. The research team is collectively embedded in an informal research community constituted through engagement with reports and papers, hosting and attendance at conferences, social media networking, and institutional connections. The team members gathered names of those they knew to be active in online extremism and terrorism research, and then sought further names and contact details from each interviewee.

The inclusion criteria for this research stipulated that, to be eligible, a researcher must have studied online extremism and/or terrorism at PhD level or above, and/or must, at the time of the interview, be working on online extremism and terrorism at a western academic institution (i.e., a college or university) or other research body (e.g., a think tank with charitable/NGO status). None of the interviewees was employed by Internet companies or law enforcement at the time of interview.

'Online research' refers to research focused on the worldwide web, social media, messaging applications, and/or similar. A broad range of extremisms were researched by REASSURE interviewees, all of them associated with the advocacy of violence and/or violent attacks. All interviewees took a 'mainstream' approach to terrorism in their interviews: that is, they focused on sub-state actors and attacks widely accepted by states and academics as falling into the terrorism category (for more on this, see Richards 2014, p.5).

All 39 interviewees were based at western universities or research institutions. Twenty-six were based solely at a university, six at both a think tank and a western university; two Europe-based interviewees worked in government-funded institutions, two worked in private institutions, and three were employed solely at think tanks at the time of interview. It was decided to focus on both academic and research institutions because of the similarities between the types of research being undertaken in each. While the findings reflect a skew towards universities, a number of university-based interviewees had worked in other roles in the past: some, for instance, had gone on to do a PhD or to work in academia following a post in a think tank – gaining a range of experience these researchers reflected in their interviews.

The focus on western institutions was a recognition of the often complex challenges and risks entailed in work on (online) extremism and terrorism in the Global South, in conflict zones, and/or in regions and countries where the risks to researchers are just as likely to come from state actors as from those engaged in the extremist or terrorist activity they are studying. Far from disregarding those working in inherently risky locations, this focus reflects our awareness that the challenges they face warrant specific, focused study.

Indeed, and as reflected in this report, researchers in western countries come from all over the world, including from countries where state actors pose their own threats; or they have family in those locations; or they are researching those locations, albeit from the relative security of western institutions. Nor does this report wish to suggest that those working in western institutions are always free to work, even in the online space, without (physical) threat. The findings presented here show that this is not the case. We intend future research to document the experiences of those in the Global South, to assess where the similarities and differences lie.

Attempts were made to include relatively equal numbers of men and women in the research, at a variety of career stages, and with diverse other identities. Of the 39 interviewees, 22 were men and 17 women. The interviewees mainly identified as white (29)

or white Jewish (3). Seven of the interviewees were people of colour, including three who identified themselves as Muslims. Nobody self-identified as LGBTQI+ or revealed their sexuality as a factor when asked if any particular personal identity characteristic(s) had affected their experience of harm.

In total, the interviewees were based in nine western countries (Austria, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States) and represented 13 nationalities (in addition to the countries just listed, interviewees also came from the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia). Some had dual nationality.

As regards ideological spheres of study, 23 people were studying the far right: 14 men and 9 women; 29 people were researching online jihadism: 17 men and 12 women. Fourteen interviewees – 9 men and 5 women – had experience of studying both. Five people also studied incel movements, either exclusively or alongside far-right and/or jihadist online activity. Interviewees came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds including communication, criminology, film and media studies, gender studies, journalism, law, political science, psychology, sociology, and Arabic.

With respect to career stage, 13 (one third) were senior, having been working with permanent contracts in universities or think tanks for eight years or more. Twenty-six (two thirds) were considered junior: those completing a PhD programme (this was 13 people: 8 women and 5 men), or in temporary contracts, or early-career researchers within eight years of completing their postgraduate research, or those having equivalent professional experience. It should be noted that status and power in the online extremism and terrorism sub-field are not necessarily linked to career stage: early-career researchers (defined by United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) as those with up to eight years post-PhD viva, or equivalent professional training, or those within

six years of their first academic appointment)[2] and PhD candidates can have significant media and social media presences, and they may be regarded as leading experts in the field by government and security actors as well as by the wider research community.

3.2 INTERVIEW TYPE AND KEY TOPICS

Four REASSURE researchers conducted the series of semi-structured interviews between January and August 2020 – so, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.[3]

Semi-structured interviews provide a framework of questions which are asked in every interview, but interviewees are free to raise additional relevant issues and concerns. Preliminary interviews were conducted within the research team itself, and some questions were amended as a result. All subsequent interviewees were asked a series of basic demographic questions (e.g., sex, age, career stage), and asked about the nature of their own research (e.g., extremist and terrorist actors studied, platforms studied, whether the research was active or passive); about the harms, if any, they experienced; if they had experienced harms, then what had helped them cope and what did they believe would help others in similar situations. See Box 1 for a full list of the indicative questions.

2   See UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) factsheet on
     'Early Career Researchers: Career and Skills Development' at
     www.ukri.org/councils/ahrc/career-and-skills-development/
     early-career-researchers-career-and-skills-development.
3   REASSURE did not focus on COVID-19 as a factor in the research
     because this report is about broader challenges in the sub-field.

BOX 1. INDICATIVE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS:

Would you like to be named in the report? *Default is anonymity*

- Age?
- Gender?
- Nationality? May be multiple
- Any other personal characteristics that you think might have impacted your experiences (e.g., sexuality, race, faith)?
- Country of your institution(s)?
- Disciplinary background?
- How many years researching in this area?
- Active or passive research (i.e., interactive or non-interactive)?
- Ideological research area(s) (e.g., far right, jihadi)?
- Online platforms researched?

CORE QUESTIONS:

- What knowledge did you have of potential challenges prior to starting your research?
- What knowledge did you have of support resources prior to starting your research?
- What challenges or risks, if any, did you eventually face?
- What well-being issues, if any, arose during your research?
- If challenges and risks arose, how did you handle them?
- What resources for dealing with these, if any, were available via your institution?
- How did you personally cope with challenges or risks?
- What resources and tools did you use to cope?
- What were the professional and/or research impacts?
- What help would you have liked to have been available?

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS ABOUT NEXT STEPS:

- What do you want to see, as regards researcher welfare, in any guidance produced for online extremism and terrorism research(ers)?
- Can you provide the names of three more colleagues active in this research sub-field for us to talk to? *We are interested in a range of interviewees, diverse in terms of age, background, experience, gender, and ethnicity*
- The interviewer will follow up within two weeks, just to ensure there have been no adverse issues as a result of the interview.

Interviews were conducted both in-person and via video-calling applications, including Skype and Zoom, or by audio, either on a landline telephone or via WhatsApp. Interviews averaged 41 minutes; the longest interview was 70 minutes in duration and the shortest 12. The report is based on our analysis of 26 hours of interviews in total. The exception was one interviewee based at a private institution in Europe, who chose to submit written responses to the Box 1 questions.

3.3 RESEARCH ETHICS AND ANONYMISATION

A number of those interviewed are well known in (online) extremism and terrorism studies. While some interviewees consented to be named in the report, we have chosen to anonymise all the data herein. This is for two reasons. First, as is apparent in the findings, some researchers have been bullied into silence by trolls. Those who feel least comfortable about openly discussing their experiences can be the most professionally precarious and vulnerable. Second, numerous interviewees described institutional practices that they wished to see improved. This is a small community, and the challenges we face are shared. We do not want to 'name and shame' the institutions that could do better (which is, actually, all of them), nor do we want to single out those apparently doing well: the aim is to document experiences, create a knowledge baseline, and learn from good practice as a community of researchers united by subject matter.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, and the possibility that an interview may have been re-traumatising, the REASSURE interview team followed up on initial interviews by email. This approach was intended to establish if interviewees required further support. No interviewees, including those who raised the most serious concerns, indicated that they wanted guidance from the REASSURE team on further support.

In the findings, the sex, age, and location of interviewees at the time of interview are noted where appropriate, in brackets and in a non-identifying manner. As regards sex, all interviewees

were invited to identify as female, male, or in any other way they wished; all identified as either female or male and so are designated either 'F' or 'M' respectively, along with their interviewee number. Interviewees therefore number M1–M22 and F1–F17. Ages are reported in 10-year brackets, so '20s', '30s', '40s', etc. For the purposes of anonymous reporting, interviewees' country locations at time of interview were grouped into three regions: 'North America' to describe Canada and the United States; 'Europe', which is used to refer to all European countries represented apart from Ireland and the UK; and 'UK,' which here encompasses England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.[4]

3.4 LIMITATIONS

A clear limitation of our research is that the sampling method could not reach those lacking embeddedness in social or professional networks, who are also likely to be the most isolated (e.g., new PhD students in institutions lacking other researchers active in online extremism and terrorism research). Another limitation is the potential difficulty for some interviewees of disclosing personal and perhaps distressing experiences to peers/colleagues, so there is a likelihood of some self-editing and withholding. However, several interviewees reported that the experience of discussing the issue of harms for this research was helpful; indeed, some noted that it was the first time they had been asked about their experiences. One observed that the REASSURE interview was, in and of itself, 'cathartic'.

Finally, it should be noted that the sections on the report's findings reflect the nature of the material studied, including descriptions of violence and brutality, and may be distressing.

4   Ireland was included in the 'UK' category because the university system there is closer to that of its British counterparts than those elsewhere in Europe, and because the very low number of Ireland-based interviewees (just 1) versus the high overall number of Britain-based interviewees (15) would have rendered the designation 'UK and Ireland' somewhat misleading.

4. FINDINGS

The findings reveal the range of harms faced by researchers. They fall into three broad categories: the challenges of staying virtually and physically safe, emotional and mental health issues caused by repeatedly viewing violent and/or hateful material, and negative professional and career impacts arising directly or indirectly from these difficulties. The findings also reveal the lack of formalised protections, with very different approaches across countries and institutions, and a heavy reliance on informal supports. Clear guidance and recommendations to support online extremism and terrorism research – and, crucially, researchers – are therefore a necessity. This report is a first step in the construction of a sufficient knowledge base from which to draw up such guidance.

The findings are organised into six sub-sections according to the themes that emerged from coding the interview data:

- Three key types of harms, impacting researchers in different ways, were reported to us. We categorise the harms as external or internal: **external harms** are harms caused by a third party in either online or offline spaces or both. **Internal harms** are psychological or emotional issues that individual researchers develop over time. The report also documents **professional harms** caused by the other two types of harms. Often, for example, an effect of online harassment resulting from their research is the silencing of researchers, which can have negative impacts on career progression;

- The next section details the **coping mechanisms** developed by online extremism and terrorism researchers to deal with these harms, including reliance on **informal communities** that often assist researchers when institutional supports are absent;

- The report then considers **institutional responses to reported harms**. Institutions frequently fail to regard online spaces as valid research locations needing researcher protection; ethical review boards, where they are deemed necessary, can hinder rather than

help research in the area; well-being provision (e.g., counselling) is also patchy, and is not tailored to the particular needs of online extremism and terrorism researchers;

- The final findings section considers **issues around institution-provided training**. While four institutions represented by interviewees do have *relevant* formalised ethics training available, much of this training is still ad hoc, taking place 'in the field', with little formal preparation of researchers for the types of material they are likely to encounter and the possible effects of consuming it regularly, the risks of online trolling and harassment, or ways to mitigate these.

Some of the themes outlined in the findings will be familiar from the scholarship on the risks of more traditional offline terrorism research (Bikson et al. 2007; Blee 1998; Dolnik 2011 and 2013); they are also echoed in guidance devised to support professionals in law enforcement, journalism, and humanitarian aid work, and those working in therapeutic settings (HM Government 2020; Hight and Smyth 2014; Samaritans n.d.). We draw on some of this literature and guidance in the sub-sections below, to illustrate where harms are more or less peculiar to the field of online extremism and terrorism research and where, on the other hand, they can be understood in the context of the threats, risks, and experiences of those professionally tasked in both this and cognate areas.

4.1 NATURE OF MATERIALS STUDIED

The majority of interviewees reported that their research was *passive.* This means that they did not personally interact with human subjects, but were engaged in the identification, collection, and/or analysis of 'born digital' data. This took the form of text, including micro-posts (e.g., tweets), blog posts, manifestos, magazines, and books; audio, including podcasts, jihadi *nasheed*, and white power music; and a variety of genres of video. Platforms and applications from which data were collected or which were otherwise studied by interviewees

included Facebook, Gab, Kik, Reddit, Telegram, TikTok, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, 4Chan, 8Chan, and others. Interviewees had also studied websites, online discussion forums, and the 'Dark Web'.

A small number of interviewees (6) communicated directly online with extremists, so were engaged in what we term here *active* research. This involves seeking out connections with online extremist and terrorist actors. Online communication (e.g., through free messaging applications) is an efficient means to gather information from distant research subjects. Others engaged in passive research said they would sometimes respond to unsolicited online extremist approaches. Given the relatively few interviewees engaged in active research, however, most of this report is taken up with harms arising from passive research, i.e., the identification, collection, and analysis of extremist and terrorist content and related 'digital trace data' (Jungherr 2015).

As regards the ideological types of users, groups, and content studied by interviewees, two main ideological spheres emerged in the research, reflecting the policy interests of recent years: approximately three quarters (30) of those interviewed studied the far right – an umbrella term which here encompasses a variety of actors ranging from male supremacists to neo-Nazis, supporters of newer militia groups (e.g., Proud Boys) and/or extremist conspiratorial movements (e.g., QAnon) – while approximately three quarters (29) had studied violent jihadist actors. As noted, roughly a third (14) of interviewees had done research on both jihadists and the far right. Other extremist or terrorist groups or movements that interviewees mentioned having studied were Irish Republican organisations, the Palestinian group Hamas, and the far left, as well as other related subjects, such as disinformation.

The types of sites used to access extremist and terrorist material varied between ideologies and over time. One interviewee who had researched violent jihadism for more than ten years recalled the very different nature of this research when he began 'lurking' in password-protected online discussion forums, from which he was frequently removed in 'purges'. Later, there was a shift to (then) more open online spaces, especially social media platforms. Recently, a shift

to more 'closed' and/or inaccessible spaces has again been observed, with interviewees now researching more 'dark social activity' (e.g., messaging apps and other forms of encrypted chat).

The interviewees discussed the kinds of content they engaged with, often for hours, daily, over long time periods (i.e., months or years). Like the sites used, the nature of the material too tended to differ according to the ideology of the extremist or terrorist group or the movement studied.

Scholars of violent jihad frequently reported exposure to extremely violent and graphic images or videos, featuring executions, torture, children killing or being killed, defiled corpses, gender- and sexuality-based violence, and generally offensive and hateful narratives. Some interviewees reported very high exposure to such content, especially those whose research was video-focused. One interviewee (M5) said he had watched and analysed every video produced by Islamic State, which would amount to thousands of hours of content. Others limited their scope to specific material; for instance, content involving children only. Around half the interviewees (20) said they had watched at least one execution video. However, one ECR (F15, 20s, UK) reported watching around 1,000 Islamic State execution videos, often pausing and rewinding to transcribe. She and others who studied violent jihadi online material described its content:

> *Extremely graphic footage ... [On-camera] executions through all sorts of means, whether that is a beheading with a knife, with a sword, shooting with a gun.*
>
> F15, 20s, UK

> *There are countless human rights abuses in our archives and there is human coldness, speaking [sic] from every camera angle recorded for just one video. So, yeah, but there is [also] the sheer amount of videos of just execution; well into the four digits.*

M8, 30s, Europe

> *I've watched so many people be executed on video; these people live in my head already. There's just some stuff and you can't unsee it, you know?*

F5, 50s, North America

Scholars of the far right reported less exposure to explicitly violent imagery in their research and more exposure to disturbing or hateful narrative content. Far-right material, although less violent in nature, was not necessarily less psychologically harmful. Fourteen interviewees studied both the online far-right and violent online jihadism. They noted a qualitative difference in content and in the harms they believed they faced. This PhD candidate (M1, 30s, UK) described the effect of studying far-right online content:

> *I've seen a number of [jihadist] execution videos and stuff, but you can, kind of, mentally prepare yourself for that. You know something incredibly gruesome is going to come. Whereas just watching hours and hours of far-right videos, just does, kind of, wear*

> *you down... By the end... [I] ... just felt, kind of, very apathetic about life and just didn't really want to engage for a while afterwards.*

For another UK-based academic, a person of colour (M15, 30s, UK), it was the threat posed by the far right that felt most imminent, over and above the type of content. With regard to jihadists, he reflected, "I might be wrong, but there wasn't really this inherent fear of reprisal that actually... these guys could come and get us. But with the far right, particularly with this kind of 8chan, young, neo-Nazi, you know, some incel threat – [it] is different." He told REASSURE he now wondered if he should lock his office door when working on campus at less busy times.

Interviewees noted too that the duration of study impacted on the harms caused. In particular, where researchers studied online extremist or terrorist content for intense short-term periods, without breaks, as might occur during a short time-framed research project, they noted immediate harms. Where they had studied online materials for years, they also indicated that cumulative harms had occurred. The long-term effects of research involving exposure to online extremism and terrorism are not yet known; related areas, such as exposure to violence and risk online by content moderators, journalists or police, are better – though still not extensively – researched (see for instance Beckett n.d.; Holton et al. 2021; Perez et al. 2010; Posetti et al. 2021; Reeve 2020). Some interviewees were aware of this and expressed concerns around the potential impacts of such longer-term exposure, particularly in the absence of sufficient safeguards and supports.

As one PhD candidate interviewed (F17, 20s, UK) noted, this research area is "not a happy zone". That said, all interviewees stressed that despite the difficulties arising from engaging with the material described, **this was content that had to be studied if contemporary extremism and terrorism were to be adequately understood**. Interviewees believed that such study was not always harmful and that, with adequate attention and learning, associated harms could

be mitigated. As a Europe-based senior scholar (M3, 40s, Europe) observed, this was vital, as "... [regarding] all of the major ... research breakthroughs that have come over the past 20 years ... material from the online sphere has been vital in all of them. ... [t]hese online spheres are our only open-source window. So it's important to do that, if you want to understand". This academic reflected too that, in over ten years of work on jihadism, he had never suffered harm, and harm should not be taken for granted in this field.

4.2 HARMS TO RESEARCHERS

> *ISIS had a video [filmed] on the beach in Libya... There were like 13 guys... They line them up, behead them and, you know, it's all in the surf... you know, in the ocean... I can still, like... I can watch it in my head right now. And, you know, so I'm on the beach with my daughters... We're kind of strolling along the beach and, you know, this sort of image as I look down into the surf... I look down and I see the – like the surf triggers this sort of blood washing up on the ocean. I'm like, "Holy shit!" You know, that's sort of secondary trauma... I had been able my whole career up until, really, about that point... to kind of compartmentalise these things... And that really was a moment where it was like, "Well, no. No."*

M16, 40s, North America

As researchers within the terrorism studies community, the REASSURE team was aware of a growing informal conversation around harms, and the need to document it. The first substantive question put to interviewees therefore concerned their perceptions of the harms they faced arising from their study of online extremism

and terrorism. **A clear research finding was that some 30% of the people REASSURE interviewed did not experience significant harm.** Indeed, of 39 interviewees, 12 did not report any harm at all. **Harm is therefore not inevitable.** Additionally, two interviewees said their work was a 'passion', and a number of others reflected that their work was a privilege and a conscious choice, made because they wanted to learn about, educate on, and combat political violence. This is unlike the situation of those working in, for example, tech companies or intelligence services, and gave interviewees some control:

> *I am very much aware that if I wished to, I could drop all of this tomorrow and actually it wouldn't affect my job in any significant way. Like, I couldn't be let go or anything like that. And that's a positive thing.*
>
> **F4, 40s, UK**

> *The difference between, say, me and [tech/police] analysts, is that you know, I have always had the choice of what to watch. It's always been in my hands… Whereas, you know, in some situations, if you're pressured into it or… you do it when you're not really ready for it, then I think it can be harmful.*
>
> **M3, 40s, Europe**

> *For us, it's a choice. And, as you know, each researcher needs to understand their own boundaries and make those choices.*
>
> **F10, 30s, North America**

There is additional reflection on *how* interviewees reported avoiding harm in section 4.3.

Another finding was that the more senior interviewees, who had spent longer in academia, were less likely to report harm: **half of the ten researchers with ten or more years in the field said they had not experienced significant harm**, i.e., harm they felt had been damaging to them. However, of the thirteen researchers with five or fewer years in the field, all but one had experienced harms that had had some impact on them. Six of these early-career researchers were studying jihadist groups at the height of the Islamic State's atrocities, three the far right, and three were studying both.

On the other hand, more than two thirds (27) of interviewees reported experiencing some harm. These harms varied widely, and included some documented in existing literature from other professional domains (e.g., social mediacompanies, journalism, law enforcement) (Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal 2015; Perez et al. 2010; Weiss Dagan 2015), such as anxiety or suspected PTSD, along with harms specific to academia. The latter included challenges to their research by university ethics boards; legal issues due to possessing extremist or terrorist materials on personal digital equipment; a fear of being arrested for their research, arising from a lack of clarity in the law (UK); suffering professional harm due to lack of visibility (a strategy adopted to avoid trolling and abuse); and/or being silenced by direct threats from extremist and terrorist actors.

The harms experienced depended to some extent on a researcher's identity and their proximity to the topic studied, the nature of the material researched (e.g., video vs. still images vs. text), and their institution's resources (e.g., counselling services) and knowledge base (e.g., experienced colleagues, knowledgeable ethical review boards). Harms also depended on the researcher's resilience, either as a personal quality or developed as a strategy.

One interviewee (M3, 40s, Europe), who had passively studied online jihadism for almost twenty years, said: "I've never minded it at all. I don't think I have ever been knowingly upset or affected in any major way by it. I mean, I am not saying that I am some super stoic, you know; just the material has never gotten to me. Maybe with a couple of exceptions; some of the worst jihadi videos a little bit. But by and large, I can and I have watched decapitation videos for an entire afternoon and I would be fine. For me personally, I haven't really been affected by this knowingly. It is a bit like being an ambulance driver. You just get, er, used to it."

Even this researcher mentions that there have been exceptions, however: a small number of times in which he was affected in some minor way by watching particular jihadi videos, though he feels that overall he became "used to it". Nonetheless, it is worth noting: some interviewees might judge themselves unaffected, but this does not mean that they have not or will not be impacted in some way.

4.2.1 External Harms: Physical Security Threats

A significant minority of interviewees reported physical threats or online threats of physical violence to themselves and those around them. While some of these threats were direct, and came from predictable actors, such as jihadists, other threats and security risks arose from situations that interviewees had not anticipated, such as media engagement or their institution's marketing of their research publications. In many cases, interviewees described learning about the possibility of threats as they progressed in their research, and wished they had been forewarned. The discussion below separates

these external harms into direct threats of physical harm and the more amorphous category of online harassment.

DIRECT THREATS OF PHYSICAL HARM

Jihadist actors had personally threatened some interviewees, giving direct warnings of violence. Six interviewees reported receiving direct death threats, which they had reported to the relevant authorities. These threats were made in person-to-person electronic messages or posted publicly online. Four of these researchers reported not feeling in any real danger from the threats because they believed that those making them were not serious and, anyway, were probably far away.

In one of the most serious cases of harm disclosed to REASSURE, an interviewee who had migrated in order to study at a western university was personally threatened by a jihadist actor in their home country, raising fears for their family who remained there. They described the measures taken by their organisation to safeguard them; nevertheless, they remained concerned about their family's safety, as family members were living closer to the jihadist actors who had made the threat. In this case, the researcher's formal employer – a think tank – was helpful, as was the university where they were studying alongside their job. There was advice for them, as well as their family, and the police were involved. In fact, a second threat followed the first, re-traumatising the interviewee as well as posing a real security risk. The incident seriously upset the entire family, as the interviewee described:

> *My [spouse] had lots of nightmares. I didn't have any… Bearing in mind, I made [my spouse] listen to the [threat] because [they are] a responsible adult and I thought that was something that affects [them] directly… Our kids did not know what was going on. [But] of course, there was this mistake… I think my six-year-old [child] overheard the [jihadist]*

> *calling my name in that [audio threat]. [My spouse]*
> *stopped the audio, but [my child] came to me and*
> *was asking, "Why is that man calling your name?*
> *Why is he shouting your name? Why?" I was like,*
> *"No; forget him. It's not anything important, it is*
> *not something you need to know." So, I would say,*
> *it's a gruelling experience for the family, both here*
> *and back home.*

It remains unclear whether this researcher will ever be able to return safely to their home country.

Those researching the far right also experienced death threats. One male researcher (M14, 40s, Europe) reported a direct threat, and incitement to others to harm him, to the police. Another male (M10) and one female researcher (F7) received indirect death threats. The woman researcher, in her 30s and based in North America, had her picture posted online with a caption referring to an incel murderer, which she understood as a threat. The male researcher, also in his 30s, had been threatened following a media appearance, but he did not take this seriously, although other staff at his European think tank had had serious threats from far-right actors. Another woman interviewee (F12, 20s, North America) had seen a number of threats against her organisation, although none naming her personally. This made her feel uneasy about being in the office, especially as the organisation had been targeted in the past.

Mirroring the risks to women journalists online (Posetti et al. 2021), the majority of women interviewees (five out of nine) working on the far right had experienced online harassment they identified as harmful; mostly, being trolled and subjected to negative comments. However, of the 14 men researching the far right, only three had experienced harms – those noted in the incidents above and another researcher of colour (M12, 30s, Europe) who found himself featured in far-right propaganda materials. He did not feel personally targeted or harmed by this, however, and observed:

> *I think gender has a way bigger impact on whether or not you're likely to get trolled than your ethnicity. I've never gotten like, a really… Like, I've gotten occasional emails, like "Go back to your country, stop polluting our universities"… I very rarely get any, like, publicly racist comments. I think that's strategic to some degree. And I think also my gender protects me quite a bit… or perhaps I'm simply just not prominent enough to attract their ire.*

Gender was explicitly mobilised in the harassment of women researchers. One female researcher (F14, 30s) in a European institution suffered a prolonged multi-front harassment campaign, encompassing not just her but also, to her horror, those around her: "The hacking campaign was also targeting parents in my [children's] class in nursery, so sending bugs to them." One of this researcher's key fears was for her husband and children, especially because the family suffered another traumatic and potentially life-threatening incident at around the same time, forcing them to relocate. The exact cause of this was not clear, but the interviewee's husband attributed it to the harassment campaign. She told REASSURE:

> *So, it was a different game if you're alone in this research, but if you have a family obviously you have to take responsibility for their well-being as well. So how do I deal with that? Well, one thing was I obviously went to the police and then I obtained a security alarm.*

This was the worst case affecting an interviewee working on the online far right. Other interviewees knew of colleagues who had been threatened, one receiving a bullet through the post, for example. One researcher in North America noted that they knew people

studying both the Islamic State and the far right who had been threatened online – something they were particularly unnerved to learn as, in the US, "everyone is armed".

In total then, and across all ideologies researched, nine of the 39 interviewees – nearly a quarter of the sample – had experienced death threats. Some appeared more credible than others, however, and not all caused distress to the researcher targeted.

ONLINE HARASSMENT OF RESEARCHERS

Online abuse, which can take a variety of forms, was relatively commonplace among interviewees. Trolling refers to the organised online mass harassment or abuse of an individual. Doxing is the term used to describe the online publication of private personal information about someone, such as their home address, with an intent to harass and cause harm or embarrassment. The interviewee mentioned above, who suffered a prolonged multi-front harassment campaign, described how the far-right activists targeting her took the time to research her background in order to harass her more effectively, trolling and doxing her. This was also the case with another female interviewee (F9, 40s, Europe) working on the far right, who was doxed and trolled by a variety of actors, some left-wing as well as right. The threats were mobilised collectively, and were made against her partner, who is a person of colour, as well as her:

> *When they were writing things about me, they wrote more about him. And they were also, like, using his social media, taking out pictures of us and, okay, we have kids, so they blurred the faces of the kids, which was nice. But they still published photos of us from his Instagram. And they also did, like, dumps from his Facebook page; they wrote about his research… And sometimes they refer to me as,*

> *like, some kind of 'Jihad Jane' that is infiltrating the defence with Sharia laws from my Muslim husband. So, they have a lot of focus on him.*

One experienced researcher of jihadist content (M19, 40s, UK) noted that risks such as trolling and doxing were relatively recent. He recalled the types of forums studied at the outset of his career, fifteen years before, and the relative protections afforded then:

> *In 2008/09, online extremism looked very different. It was all password-protected message forums. And if you had a password, if you had a login, you were able to go into these forums and look at the posts. But it was not really a question of safety, because it was all anonymous, and there was no indication that they could track you in any shape or form.*

Now, however, online harassment is an everyday risk of online research. An ECR (F13, 40s) in the UK described the stress caused to her by Islamic State supporters while doing her PhD research:

> *I hadn't anticipated some of the challenges that I did actually find when I was approaching people online. So, for instance, that I would be screenshotted, that there would be things spread about me, who I was, what my intentions were, warnings about me – not to speak to me… These kinds of lies and untruths that would be spread about me were not things that I had control over. And, you know, that wasn't something that I'd anticipated or realised how much anxiety… that might cause me or even, you know, potential real risks. Because when somebody*

> *is part of a Facebook network where a lot of people support Islamic State, you have to take those kinds of accusations quite seriously.*

In this case the interviewee was a student and had little institutional help. On the other hand, an experienced researcher (M3) at a research institution in Europe recalled a particular incident of doxing that was dealt with quickly and efficiently by his employers: "At one point our names and addresses were posted on a jihadi Facebook page and within hours, the police were patrolling the neighbourhood." This interviewee worked at a government-funded research institute and felt that this enabled the swift implementation of protections that others in, for example, non-government-funded academic institutions might not enjoy. He also reported never having experienced actual harm as a result of such incidents.

Some harassment could cause reputational damage. One interviewee (M22, 30s, US) who had engaged in active research, talking to jihadist actors, recalled an early experience that he partly blamed himself for:

> *I think [researchers] were overzealous because [they were so] excited they had access to talk to [jihadists] that they were kind of giving them platforms that they shouldn't have. Including myself, I guess you could say… And then, there was this case where I was talking to the head of [named jihadist group] before he was killed, and I was having a private conversation, but he, like… made it public by taking a screenshot of the DM and then saying something which is kind of embarrassing for me.*

Although he believed few others would now recall this episode, the interviewee remembered it as negative and shameful. He stressed that, while it might never happen to them, researchers should always bear in mind that communications can be screenshotted, and published; researchers, he underlined, should communicate with their research subjects as if they expect their messages to be exposed publicly.

While the most serious threat to researchers of online jihadism came from jihadist actors, that was not the only threat. The interviewee mentioned above (M3, 40s, Europe), working at a European government-funded institute, reported being threatened by conspiracy theorists as well as other actors:

> *You get it from all sides. I can get it from the extreme left that I'm, kind of, some reactionary intelligence, pro-Israel, pro-Mossad agent and I can get it from the far right that I'm cuddling up to the Islamists and that sort of thing... Far right accusing me of being a traitor and, yeah, "you know what happens to traitors that are on the Muslims' team" and all that sort of stuff.*

He reassured himself with the knowledge that academic researchers are rarely the target of an attack, and journalists and politicians are more vulnerable.

Many interviewees believed visibility was problematic, whether on social media or, in particular, in the press. Three male interviewees (M12, M17, M20) and one female (F4) noted that they deliberately aimed for uncontroversial social media accounts that did not use personal photographs or information, in order to keep a low profile and avoid abuse, online and off. One of these, an early-career researcher in North America (M20, 30s), said of his social media: "I try to just kind of fall through the cracks... I'm trying

not to get too much attention, I guess. And it's worked out – touch wood – it's worked out okay so far. But I might… I might just be lucky, you know; time may come where I don't feel safe anymore."

One interviewee in Europe (F9, 40s) told us she had once been part of a team publishing a report anonymously, in order to avoid harms; but this decision had in fact received public criticism. Another interviewee, a person of colour based in the UK (M15, 30s), explained his team's discussion on anonymity:

> [We said,] we've got some options about when we publish, right? Do we want to anonymise the publication? Or do we want to use pseudonyms? Just to avoid any heat for us, right? And it was an option that I think we were kind of veering towards… And then we kind of came to the conclusion that actually, you know, this is what we do. And we're academics, and we're not going to shy away from it. We're going to publish in our names, but we're just going to mitigate these risks as much as we can.

Some decisions affecting them were, however, beyond interviewees' control, particularly in engagements with journalists and media. In several instances, threats and harassment were the result not of interviewees' research itself, but of media reporting about it, over which researchers felt they had little influence. A North America-based PhD researcher (F6, 30s) observed that the online harassment she experienced resulted from the visibility of her research:

> It's sort of that Catch 22 as a researcher: you want to publish your research and you want to have as many people be able to access it… Maybe a reporter will say 'Oh, I heard you do this research. Can you

> *talk to me about this or that?'... But it's sort of a double-edged sword because, just like we watch ISIS, they watch us. So, the more exposure, the more unfortunately you become a target, and they're very good at trolling researchers and journalists. So, most of the holiday break, I was dealing with ISIS supporters trolling me on different social media platforms.*

Others described how journalists had used inappropriate headlines for articles featuring their work, and inaccurate implications were then drawn. Three female interviewees, one the employee at a government-funded institution (F9, 40s) whose husband was targeted alongside her, one the senior academic whose acquaintances were targeted (F14, 30s, Europe), and one a doctoral student (F11, 40s), described negative outcomes of media engagement with their work on aspects of the online far right:

> *[Activists] went out and found a piece I'd written and focused on the cover picture. Well, I didn't pick the picture, but it was like three, four days of just constant abuse. And it's complicated because I follow a policy of not feeding the trolls around things like that, but it's hard. You want to defend yourself.*
>
> **F11, 40s, North America**

> *4chan is premised on controlling your feelings. Shitposting and trolling, but also then exploiting the online traces of your victim... These three very young men in their late teens or early 20s,*

> *somewhere in the world, had done quite extensive research [on me]. My body was kind of dehumanised and magnified, so I became a meme myself. And that was obviously in misogynist terms. And I kind of withdrew... from public debate for a few months, said no to all media appearances... And, you know, that effect is not just to intimidate and frighten the researcher, but also to silence the researcher... So, in that sense, it kind of succeeded.*

F14, 30s, Europe

> *I avoid doing many things like giving interviews or when it comes to areas that I know will attract a lot of attention. Which I think is kind of sad. But it's like, I don't... I can't take it. I'm tired.*

F9, 40s, Europe

One harm suffered therefore was not just intimidation, but silencing: the intimidation effectively removed researchers from the public space of influence and made them fearful of future public engagement. Interviewees discussed in this section were reducing their visibility on social and other media, both to avoid future harassment and as a result of past and current harassment. In fact, these types of concerns caused at least one female doctoral researcher interviewed (F16, 20s, UK) to opt not to pursue research that she had originally planned. Linking her decision to knowledge of the trolling and harassment of a male colleague, she said:

> *People were making threats to him online. So that was something that happened a while ago, but I remember, I wanted to publish in this area; on, like, the era of incels, and me and my supervisors kind of decided, well, we're not going to do that because we don't know, if we put our name out – or if I specifically, as a woman, put my name out there – we don't know what the consequences might be.*

4.2.2 Gender and Other Identity-related Harm

> *… as academia, you know, has been becoming more diverse and, you know, has more women, and people of colour, and queer people. And, as such, in academia this choice to actually look at ideologies and movements that target your own identity, I think, is a growing choice, [but] I don't think there are really any resources that exist in the university to deal with [it].*

F3, 20s, North America

A clear finding from our interviews was that, when doing research on online extremism and terrorism, identity matters. As Breen Smyth (2009) notes, "Research on violence and harm is invariably conducted within a powerful emotional force field created and sustained by violence and the reaction to it. The researcher must negotiate this force field using … their subjective understanding of the violence and the actors being studied" (p.195). This subjective

engagement with the field means that positionality matters in the harms produced. This is particularly true when working online, an environment within which misogyny, racism, and abuse are rife (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2015; HM Government 2020; Lewis, Rowe, and Wiper 2017; Romano 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, REASSURE found that the challenges of online extremism and terrorism research are both raced and gendered. Interviewees of colour, women, and junior and early-career researchers were especially vulnerable to some of the worst effects of online work on extremism and terrorism, including misogynist hate.

One Muslim researcher (30s, UK), studying for a PhD focused on a violent jihadist group, described how their faith was attacked when they were threatened online in a public forum by terrorist actors:

> *I was singled out for an attack, but also for a threat and questioning my Islam, and I can tell you that was very personal to me because I am someone who is profoundly religious… And I remember it was a Friday but… I mean, I was overwhelmed by anxiety and I remember sitting in the mosque, listening to the imam who gives the usual sermons in the mosque, but I don't, I can't… remember what he said in the sermons – I was only thinking about what happened.*

This interviewee was especially traumatised by the weaponisation of his religious identity in the threat made. As they also noted, "[the jihadist actor] wants to bully me into silence". And in this case again, that was effective, as the researcher subsequently deactivated their social media accounts, stopped agreeing to media interviews for some months, and cancelled a number of public speaking engagements. Another Muslim interviewee (M11) described how distressed he felt studying jihadist texts, given his own faith.

Similar feelings were evident in white interviewees working on the far right. A white male doctoral student (M1, 30s, UK) noted a growing feeling of cynicism when studying far-right material, saying it was "just kind of soul-destroying, I mean, hours and hours of 'the world's going to burn and white people are going to become extinct'. Content which you really fundamentally disagree with. But just after a while it really kind of wears you down".

There was also fear and paranoia among some interviewees doing work on the online far right about the people around them, and this was gendered. Research on a distant conflict zone often means the researcher is distanced from the subject of study – which is not necessarily the case in online research. Proximity to subjects impacted especially those working in locations where the movements they studied were, or could be, active. In practical terms, this meant interviewees studying the far right felt most at risk. One female doctoral student (F11, 40s, US), working on misogynist extremism, described how her work on hateful narratives began to impact on her trust in men generally:

> *I would be walking on the streets and thinking, "Is it you? Are you one of these guys? Like, you fit the demographic profile, you know, on campus." I know they recruit on our campuses. You know, it's just not a great way to be… the paranoia of every man you interact with. "Are you one of these people?" Because it's entirely possible.*

Female academics can face discrimination due to misogyny within the academy; women academics researching far-right misogyny can therefore be doubly marginalised. For female researchers of the far right, too, abuse was sexualised, directed at their appearance and their bodies. A North America-based academic (F7) in her 20s had experienced misogynist online harassment, and regarded this as another aspect of wider sexism. She said:

> *There's a lot of condescension, in academia...*
> *difficulty getting ahead as a woman in general.*
> *And so all of those things kind of feed together*
> *in terms of the toll that it takes, which would*
> *be very different if I went from, you know, studying*
> *this vile stuff to just being in this perfect world*
> *where I didn't then, you know, encounter people,*
> *you know, men and condescension and harassment*
> *and abuses and other things in everyday life,*
> *or in my professional life.*

Having withdrawn from scholarly and/or public spaces as a result of threats and harassment, some female interviewees related feelings of professional vulnerability when re-joining the public space. The female academic who became a sexualised meme (F14, 30s, Europe) described how stress affected her professionally: "I started to cry whilst giving [a] paper and I've never done that in public." This led to fears of reputational and professional damage. She said, "I think, again, particularly in this field of extremism studies you might be particularly self-censoring because you're afraid of being framed as the emotional researcher in a very male-dominated space." This interviewee's perception was, again, of both misogyny in the field studied and a masculinist research culture. This is further discussed in section 4.3.3 on barriers to support from colleagues. Male REASSURE interviewees too reflected on the impact of their gender on their ability to cope. One ECR in North America (M20, 30s) said, "I just, as a strong white man, just kind of fight through these types of things. But then later, I felt really, really not so good about it." He said his partner was encouraging him to talk more as at times he "almost had, like, a breakdown".

Notwithstanding all this, for some interviewees the **Internet represented a safe space** in which to conduct research and enabled work they might otherwise find impossible. The alternative to online research on extremism and terrorism is to attempt to meet

with extremist and terrorist actors, often via travel to conflict zones, or even infiltration – all of which is potentially dangerous (Blee 1998; Adler, Adler, and Rochford 1986; Dolnik 2011; Kenney 2013). As one PhD candidate (F15, 20s, UK) noted, "As [I am] a white western female researcher, [the online space] enables me to contact women who I wouldn't necessarily form part of their community. It provides that bridge; it puts me on a level playing field almost, to be able to reach out to [them] through WhatsApp." Other female researchers also noted that it was *being online* that enabled their work studying violent misogyny, and this was a positive. In effect, **online research provided gendered benefits and protections to researchers, as well as exposing them to risks and harms**.

PROFESSIONAL HARMS

The desire to avoid public abuse or direct threats has led women and junior researchers, in particular, to withdraw from public space, as has been discussed. However, academic success is institutionally predicated on measures such as engagement, impact,[5] invitations to present, and visibility, and some interviewees felt they were being unfairly penalised professionally simply for wanting to stay safe. Some had support from colleagues in this situation, but others did not. In one case of harassment following media engagement, the female researcher who had been memeified (F14, 30s, Europe) felt advice from male colleagues was not helpful: "Basically what I got is... 'Well, you're too much in the media'... I did feel very alone in that process."

Most academic researchers are named public figures, identified as authors on their publications; otherwise, they face career disadvantage. They are also expected to be accessible to students. This means they face different risks from police analysts or tech company workers, who are not public-facing. Interviewees based at universities suggested this was something their institutions

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5   UKRI defines this as "the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy" on their webpage on 'Defining Impact,' available at www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/defining-impact.

did not always understand. When, in the absence of institutional support, individuals were forced to make their own safety decisions, they could feel exposed, at risk professionally, and liable to appear difficult, non-cooperative, or over-anxious. A PhD candidate in her 20s at a British university (F17) said she was nervous of publicity, following online harassment in the past by far-right trolls, and feared this would damage her career:

> *Whenever I have an article come out now, I'm a little bit scared to share it too widely. I'm like, I want to reach the academic people that I want to and the platforms and things. But I don't want it to reach those people. So it definitely hindered how visible I want to be. And, like, the university, they want promotion. They want you to be as visible as you can. They want the impressive things, like you managed to reach this many people or whatever. But it just freaks me out a bit now.*

This senior male academic (M19, 40s, UK), on the other hand, explained why he felt comfortable with a media presence:

> *None of us were pressured to go on TV or to have a high profile; we could have chosen to just do academic publications and remain more or less silent as far as the wider public is concerned. But we decided to be more public about it, knowing the risks and understanding that this would expose us. There were other people that decided not to do that for different reasons. Some people, you know, perhaps, were a little bit more afraid. Other people didn't want public exposure because they wanted*

> *to work in government and were seeking security clearances and they thought it was detrimental for them to appear on TV. So, I think it's important that [as an institution] you generally don't kind of put pressure on people to expose themselves if, for whatever reason, they don't want that. And thankfully with [myself], you have people who are quite keen to be in the public limelight. We're happy to compensate for people who are not so keen!*

While this is true, as long as the risks are most keenly felt by those with less status and less security – whether job security or security from hostile actors – inequalities in academia can be exacerbated in a vicious cycle. Those who are – or feel – high-status and most secure inevitably become the most visible, with the added career benefits visibility brings.

Some professional harms come from state security actors as well as extremists (Breen Smyth 2009; Reynolds 2012). In some countries, predominantly the UK, interviewees indicated that the risk of police intervention in academic research on extremism felt ever-present. This carried both personal and reputational risks, of which institutions were aware. No researcher interviewed for REASSURE reported that they had actually fallen foul of the law, but some researchers had concerns that their work might be seized by the police and they might be prosecuted. For those studying in countries where they were not a citizen and where they belonged to a marginalised group, the risk felt greater. This male doctoral student of colour (M9, 30s) noted that study in the United Kingdom felt risky, given the broad parameters of the law:

> *With the new terrorism law here in the UK, what became unsettling is the law is not very clear as to when you would be seen as someone who is sharing or watching terrorist content and*

> *therefore a criminal suspect versus a researcher. And this is not something I feel I can speak about, and advocate for change about, in a country that is not mine.*

This fear added to the existing emotional strains on researchers from their work on online extremism and terrorism and threats against them and their families.

It should also be noted that simply being junior could be a barrier to expressing dissatisfaction or signalling a problem with aspects of the work. As this UK doctoral candidate (M17, 20s, UK) said, "I mean, I'm a young researcher, I want to get into the field researching terrorism. I don't want to cause a fuss on my first project, I can do it by myself. That is my thing. I'll handle it." The researcher had experienced emotional harms due to his work, and enlisted the help of a private therapist rather than speak out.

Another key finding of REASSURE, therefore, and one linked to identity, is that **those with the least professional status and power, in early career roles or as doctoral candidates, felt most at risk of professional harm**. They were, in many cases, the least able to voice their questions or concerns within their own institutions; the least likely to challenge decisions made by those in positions of authority, and the most likely to have their concerns minimised or ignored; and they were vulnerable in particular ways to the extreme actors in the movements they studied. All of this impacted on interviewees' well-being, including their ability to progress professionally.

4.2.3 Internal Harms: Negative Mental and Emotional Impacts

> *You kind of, desensitise a little bit. Most of the images are fine. But every now and then, there's just one where you're just like, 'Oh, wow... I need a minute'.*
>
> **F17, 20s, UK**

> *I must have seen thousands and thousands of... people who've just been killed or corpses that are bloated and defiled and awful stuff... and the feeling of numbness – or not... It's not really numbness, it's the feeling of being able to ignore it... Which is kind of necessary from a professional perspective. That is not something I'm comfortable with.*
>
> **M4, 30s, UK**

> *I had a hard stop at about 4.35 p.m. because I realised if I looked at anything later on, it would somehow seep into my dreams.*
>
> **F6, 30s, North America**

> *Thinking about this fucking image of somebody getting his damn hand cut off may send me back to therapy next week. I've seen a guy who lost both his hands in the Caliphate. He can do fucking nothing. I feel really bad for the guy. I try not to think about it... but I think... these images, they leave sadness in you and... despair.*
>
> **M8, 30s, Europe**

Mental health and researcher well-being was a concern for everyone who was interviewed for REASSURE. The most prevalent harm reported by our interviewees was emotional or psychological, with a minority of interviewees having personally experienced serious mental health challenges that they linked to their research. These harms largely stemmed from exposure to hate and terrorism content. Six interviewees also discussed their fears of a physical attack such as being followed or targeted at work in the office, or when out with friends. This researcher (F3, 20s, North America) at a private institute gave an example: "Even to this day, if I'm sitting in a restaurant, I would prefer to be facing the door. Which is funny because obviously, most of the time when I go out, it's with other people who work in this field [and] who would like to do the same thing. So it's a battle for who gets the chair to look at the door." The emotional and psychological harms of working on high-risk topics online have been documented increasingly over the past decade, including in accounts from social media company content moderators and from those screening for extreme online content, such as images of child sexual exploitation, while working for the police or other agencies (Arsht and Etcovitch 2018; Beckett 2018; Gillespie 2018; Newton 2019).

SECONDARY TRAUMATISATION AND PTSD SYMPTOMS

The term vicarious trauma (VT) began to be used in the 1990s in response to the observation that therapists often suffered harmful reactions to accounts of trauma related to them by clients

(Trippany, White Kress, and Allen Wilcoxon 2004). Key to the concept of VT – often also referred to as 'secondary trauma' or 'secondary traumatic stress' – is the idea that harm results in "profound changes in the core aspects of the therapist's self", in part owing to their empathetic approach (Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995, p.152 cited in Trippany, White Kress, and Allen Wilcoxon 2004, p.31). It later became more broadly applied to the negative impacts of second-hand exposure to difficult or disturbing images and narratives experienced by a variety of health professionals, not just counsellors; and then to all those subject to such impacts as a result of repeated, generally work-based, exposure to such content. In the context of experiences with narratives of child sexual abuse, Weiss-Dagan (2015) explains vicarious trauma thus:

> *Trauma can be emotionally contagious ... [Following] repeated exposure to the suffering of others, a person may experience alterations to their inner world view or cognitive schemes, as well as the inability to build intimate relationships based on confidence and trust. Their sense of self-perception and self-mastery become distorted.*

This trauma is not to be confused with burnout, which can be experienced in any profession; VT is specifically related to a secondary experience of trauma that has effects similar to direct experience of it (McCann and Pearlman 1990).

Vicarious trauma need not but *can* result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or its symptoms.[6] According to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., text revisions, 2022 (*DSM–5–TR*)), PTSD may be

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6   A diagnosis of PTSD requires intervention by a physician and confirmation that a range of symptoms have been experienced for more than one month (*DSM–5–TR*, p.302).

experienced following exposure to one or more traumatic events, including actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (p.305; see also pp. 301–303). This exposure may be direct or indirect, including:

> *... in the course of occupational duties, through being exposed to grotesque details of an event. The indirect exposure of professionals to the grotesque effects of war, rape, genocide, or abusive violence inflicted on others occurring in the context of their work duties can also result in PTSD and thus is considered to be a qualifying trauma ... Examples include first responders exposed to serious injury or death and military personnel collecting human remains. Indirect exposure can also occur through photos, videos, verbal accounts, or written accounts (e.g., police officers reviewing crime reports or conducting interviews with crime victims, drone operators, members of the news media covering traumatic events, and psychotherapists exposed to details of their patients' traumatic experiences) (pp. 305–306).*

Also noted in *DSM–5–TR* is that "[t]he disorder may be especially severe or long lasting when the stressor is interpersonal and intentional (e.g., torture, sexual violence)" (p.305). Beheadings and other on-camera murders (e.g., live streams of terrorist attacks) fall into the latter category. PTSD symptoms include intrusive memories such as nightmares or flashbacks; avoidance; and a change in emotional reactions (Weiss Dagan 2015). The types of harms and impacts REASSURE interviewees described were consistent with both vicarious trauma and PTSD symptoms, although few interviewees had received a medical diagnosis. In the most severe

cases, interviewees reported **intrusive thoughts of conflict scenarios**, being hyper-vigilant (e.g., imagining the constant possibility of attack), and/or **hearing voices that were not there**. **Loss of trust and paranoia** were also reported.

For instance, an ECR (F15, 20s) based at a UK university described intrusive thoughts relating to a particular ISIS video:

> *[A] haunting, I suppose you could call it. And interestingly, it was a very different video. Most executions are conducted with the victim initially kneeling, but then pushed down to the floor and the neck being extended, to enable them to cut the throat. This one video was not conducted that way. And the victim was still kneeling, which enabled them to close their... their head down... and you could see that anguish, that struggle, that is not so visible in the other videos... So, that's the one video that has come back [to me] repeatedly.*

The research for which this video was viewed did not need to go to a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for approval as it did not involve active research with human participants. Other work undertaken by the same interviewee involving active research had been passed by the institution's ethics committee. The researcher was therefore already aware of counselling services available, but had not used them, preferring to speak instead to friends and family. Another PhD-level interviewee (M4, 30s), also in the UK, explained how one particular scene impacted him:

> *It was just a video of people being shot at, seemingly randomly... It was framed as "Rafidi hunting"...[7] and that... I hadn't been expecting to see that. I watched it very naively and I was just looking at it on my phone because I think people were chatting about it on Twitter, and I was interested... And that really stuck with me and... I can still remember vividly... exactly the scene I'm thinking about.*

In this case, again, it was a "particular experience ... as opposed to a rolling trauma" that made the difference. Another interviewee (M22, 30s, North America) with more than ten years of experience studying online content on jihadist and related conflict described what he himself determined to be PTSD-like symptoms:

> *Sometimes when I go out for bike rides, and there'd be, like, a helicopter above me, I'd get, like, kind of **paranoid** or feel uncomfortable, which obviously I know is a clear sign of some level [of] PTSD. Obviously, it's not the same as somebody who's actually experienced it in person, but I know that that clearly isn't normal. Whenever I've been in areas and people are on, like, scooters driving by it makes me really uncomfortable because I know all the assassinations on those that have been posted in videos.*

This account describes both **hypervigilance** and **a change in emotional reaction and perception**. The interviewee shows awareness of its cause; however, he also minimises the experience

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7   'Rafidi' is an Arabic word currently used as a religious slur by some Sunni Muslims to refer to Shi'a Muslims.

because he did not "actually" experience the original trauma. Another interviewee (F1, 30s), this time at a British university, also described how her perception was affected by the work she was doing:

> *I realised that whenever I was sitting in front of the computer – for example, reading the ISIS magazines or videos – I would hear things that didn't exist. [Laughs]. For example, a colleague was passing my office and I was just so deeply immersed in reading ISIS magazines, and I heard him saying 'My student has died.' And I thought, 'Uh oh, I'm so sorry.' I got all alerted. And I'm like, 'I'm sorry. How old was he? What happened?' He said, 'Nothing!' [He had just said] 'My student didn't submit his assignment.'*

How long a researcher spends in the online field matters in terms of potential psychological risks and harms (Reynolds 2012). Three interviewees expressed concerns that their faith in society was being gradually eroded because of the nature of their research. The report has already noted that a greater proportion of ECRs reported harms, when compared with those who had been in the field the longest. On the other hand, however, some interviewees said that harms had only become apparent after a career in the field. A number were concerned that they had not noticed the harms gradually being caused by their work, including **numbing and desensitisation**. One senior female academic (F5, 50s, North America) said: I think you don't realise until you're pretty deep into it the impact that it's having on you. I don't know if that was your experience, but that was [mine]. You're a couple of hundred executions in before you start to realise 'Oh, my God'." Another senior academic in North America (M16, 40s) told us:

> *You hear the, sort of probably overused cliché of, like... the frog sitting in the pot of warm water and the heat's getting turned up a little bit, [and] it feels all right. And then at some point, it kind of gets a little too hot. And then at some point, it starts to boil a little bit, and at some point, it could kill you. The point is, you don't really know, necessarily, what that threshold is.*

Those with less time spent as an online extremism and terrorism researcher also worried that the long-term cumulative effects of the work were unknown. As a European think tank employee (M10, 30s) observed, "It always feels like... getting a scar, waiting for it to heal and then hurting yourself again... Because just taking a break... it's just a way of hurting yourself less in the long run. And I don't know how, long-term, all of this will pan out." Interviewees also, however, recognised desensitisation as an important coping mechanism, with 14 (one third) saying they felt inured to graphic brutality. On the other hand, this concerned some, who believed that desensitisation was in itself a harm, an issue we discuss in section 4.3.2.

ISOLATION, DEPRESSION, AND WITHDRAWAL

In some cases work-related concerns led to interviewee isolation andwithdrawal, particularly from friends and family. Five (13%) noted that they had felt depressed because of their work and six (15%) said they felt they had withdrawn from others as a result of their research. As one interviewee at a European think tank (M10, 30s) noted, "You can become very bitter because you see the worst of the worst of humanity." Interviewees described a desire not to burden loved ones with the darkness of the work, however, or with their fears about security. A PhD student studying jihadists in the UK (F13, 40s) observed:

> *I had my friends, but they were a bit, like, incomprehensive [sic] of the whole thing. So it didn't help to talk to them, actually. I would never talk to my family about this because, you know, my mum would be horrified if she thought somebody who is being charged with terrorism offences was posting shit about me online. Can you imagine? 'Oh, yeah, Mum, like, by the way, I might get my head chopped off.'*

Returning to the phenomenon of vicarious trauma or VT, in which secondary exposure to trauma causes harm (Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal 2015; Simpson and Boggs 1999; Trippany, White Kress, and Allen Wilcoxon 2004), some REASSURE interviewees described a reluctance to put others at risk of this form of trauma by recounting their experiences. They therefore retreated from others when experiencing sadness and depression themselves.

4.2.4 Erosion of Boundaries

More than a quarter (11) of the interviewees described how the nature of their work and their immersion online resulted in a loss of work-life boundaries. They experienced periods of being unable to switch off, instead being permanently 'on' and engaging with violent or disturbing material at all times.

For those who were involved in active research, this was in part a by-product of work in a field where it is notoriously difficult to speak to terrorist actors in particular (Silke 2001; Neumann and Kleinmann 2013; Horgan 2004). This meant that the pressure to engage at all times, night and day, was intense. An ECR (F13, 40s, UK) observed: "If it's an extreme participant, then, yeah, I don't want to lose them. So I will respond at, like, midnight or pick up the phone even though it's so unhealthy. Because you're kind of desperate to get in." Another woman PhD candidate (F15, 20s) in the UK reflected: "I was desperately trying to interview people. And if they texted

me or WhatsApped me at midnight, I would feel I've got to respond because I'm going to lose them. Yes, so I was extremely unhealthy and un-boundaried." And yet another scholar (M2, 30s, North America) said:

> *I had like 10 or 12 interviews going at once; I had people responding in the middle of the night… Because it wasn't like a typical interview where, you know, you scheduled to meet somebody at a coffee shop at 1 p.m., you talk to them for an hour and a half, and then you go home. This was like, it was… Because it's texting and because they're in a war zone and they get back to you when they get back to you. It was, kind of, it just, kind of, took over your life. And so I was, you know, always texting people, regardless of what time it was; always talking to people, screenshotting things as I went to, kind of, keep an archive of the conversation. And so it just, kind of, went on and on like that. And so that was another kind of impact, I guess, which wasn't anticipated. You're at the dinner table, you're travelling and you're texting, you're, you know, you're always kind of in communication with them.*

REASSURE interviewees clearly recognised that they were prioritising work in an unhealthy way because they were afraid to 'lose' opportunities to conduct good research. The pressure to do this apparently came from different directions: their desire to make their project succeed, the difficulty of gathering interviews, the ubiquity of modern communication, and differences in time zones.

This 'always on' mentality is also, some interviewees noted, a wider issue in academia at large. All those interviewed for REASSURE agreed there was a desire to keep up with the immediacy

of events. Even if interviewees were not directly taking part in a research project, it was hard not to check material, if they knew it was there:

> *You know, during times when there's a lot of drama, there are people posting Facebook videos in the evening. You know, I've been, like, getting ready to go out for the night. And I'm, like, putting on makeup while my phone is there. And I'm watching, like, a Facebook live video. Kind of those moments where you're like 'wow, I really shouldn't do this'. But here I am.*
>
> **F12, 20s, US**

Interviewees did not want to miss out on the latest events, and because of this became used to blurred work-life boundaries. The feeling described resembles a form of addiction, in that interviewees knew that what they were doing was unhealthy, yet to some degree felt powerless to stop.

4.2.5 "When a Terrorist Dies on You": Grief and Bereavement When It's 'Only' Online

The majority of REASSURE interviewees were not engaged in *active* research in which they sought out and interviewed human subjects. Most were conducting *passive* work: data-scraping and analysing videos, still images, and textual content. For those who did conduct interviews, however, researcher-participant relationships with subjects could induce harm. When those subjects were fighting for jihadist groups, the potential harms for researchers included grief and bereavement. One senior male academic (M2, 30s, North America) explained how he communicated with more than 50 fighters, around ten of them consistently over a period of time: "And of course, then they start dying. And that had an interesting kind of impact on me. There are several people who,

you know, I'd been talking to for two years, two and a half years, who got killed. And I mean, it had an actual, you know, a major impact on me emotionally." This was an unanticipated harm that had not been discussed in the IRB preceding his research project. It was also one that he had not expected, owing to the online nature of the correspondence: "It's weird because you don't actually know them, right? Like, it's just people that you're texting with over and over again. And, so, I hadn't really thought about it in that language, in those terms, that I was feeling upset about this person." What the interviewee discovered is also borne out in the wider literature on the links between emotion and online communication, and is likely to be familiar to many people following the widespread virtualisation of work, play, and an array of other activities during the COVID-19 pandemic: the affective and emotional bonds that can be formed online do have meaning, even if people have never physically met (Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013; Pearson 2017).

4.3 GETTING THROUGH IT: HOW RESEARCHERS COPE

> *[For] a lot of people ... that were at the front lines of ...the beginning of this phenomenon in 2012 and [20]13 ... there was no model or experience of anybody else. So, we kind of were just all experiencing [it] as it happened and figuring things out. So, I guess, unfortunately, we're the test dummies.*
>
> **M22, 30s, North America**

It is clear from the preceding sections that for many interviewees the harms were significant, whether external threats to security or emotional harms. Indeed, 22 interviewees (56%) reported harms that they felt had affected their well-being, and a total of 27 (69%)

reported *some* harm during the course of their work. This section describes and discusses online extremism and terrorism researchers' individual and collective coping mechanisms.

Interviewees talked us through some of their key coping mechanisms, and we present this community know-how in boxes throughout this section. We hope this will help those seeking ideas in this report for setting up their own protections. Although not scientifically validated, these tips are tried and tested and represent a toolbox that individual researchers might want to use, if needed. There is clearly no one-size-fits-all approach. Worth noting here again is that Phase Two and Phase Three of REASSURE will produce more detailed guidance on good practice in researcher welfare.

Despite the negativity of some experiences relayed in this report so far, one clear finding is that a core overall coping mechanism for interviewees was a firm **belief in the value of online extremism and terrorism research**. As one think tank researcher (M10, 30s, Europe) noted, "We're doing the right work. So it, morally, in a way emboldens you." This is similar to the field of journalism, in which a belief in the work was found to be an important factor in protecting people working with traumatic digital imagery (Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal 2015). As noted in an earlier section, two interviewees explicitly called the work their 'passion'. Each interviewee believed in the wider societal value of what they did, and this motivated them to keep going.

This section explores a variety of other coping mechanisms communicated to us by interviewees. In particular, it explores what **practical steps online extremism and terrorism researchers took to mitigate the stresses of routine engagement with online content that was often violent and, almost without exception, otherwise disturbing**. We begin, however, by reviewing some of the measures interviewees took to protect their (online) privacy and safety.

4.3.1 (Online) Privacy and Safety Precautions

The online extremism and terrorism researchers interviewed adopted a range of precautionary online security measures. These included technical measures, for the purposes of increasing their (online) privacy and thereby preventing trolling, doxing, and/or other types of online harassment and insecurity, and its spillover into 'real world' settings. See Box 2 for an overview of these.

Box 2. STEPS INTERVIEWEES TOOK TO ENSURE THEIR (ONLINE) PRIVACY AND SAFETY

- Recognised that a public social media presence carried risks and weighed up the costs and benefits, some deactivating personal social media profiles altogether.

- If retaining a personal social media presence, removed and did not post additional personal information (e.g., phone number(s); home address; personal photographs; if possible, office number and location details) in the online space.

- Avoided online controversy.

- Changed passwords frequently and used a password manager to avoid replication.

- Used a specific work-only device (e.g., laptop, PC, mobile telephone) for research.

- For accessing messaging services, used 'burner' or specific work phones which contained no associated contacts, so that the number could not easily be traced back to them.

- Used a virtual private network (VPN), especially if visiting online entities controlled by extremists or terrorists (e.g., websites).

- Notified management within their institution and the relevant law enforcement authorities of threats, especially death threats.

One male early-career researcher (M20, 30s, North America) described the precautions he took to reduce his online footprint as follows:

I'm not gonna put my own private telephone number online. I make sure that for all my social media there's not, like, anything that's not professional. I make sure that you can't connect me to it, you know what I mean; I won't use my real name, I'll use… I think I have, like, my first and middle name. But even there, I've noticed, I make sure that I don't put too much personal information on there, because it doesn't take much for people to triangulate a couple of pieces of information and realise who you are, or where you live, or that kind of thing. So, I'm very careful about that. I just don't disclose too much information, because I just don't see value in that.

Two North American interviewees (F3 and F12) had paid external companies to have information about them removed from online. One worked at a private institution (F3, 20s, North America) which she felt made the difference: "Actually my firm went ahead and paid one of those security firms that goes through and wipes all your information from the Internet. So I'm very lucky that my firm was willing to spend the money to do that for us – obviously, especially in academia, people don't necessarily have those resources." Indeed, few REASSURE interviewees at any institution described being talked through such measures institutionally, and none as an institutional formality at the outset of their research.

Knowledge about the use of technical precautions was mixed. Only seven interviewees mentioned using a virtual private network (VPN), which masks a computer's Internet Protocol (IP) address and therefore location when the user goes online. One (M20) said he used to use one, but only when going to "the darker places" on the net. Some researchers used only institutional or university computers when conducting research, to protect them personally against cyber threats. Only one female interviewee said she changed passwords often. Another interviewee (M9) noted potential issues that might

arise with law enforcement agencies when researching certain topics on personal computers. This issue was not experienced across all countries, but fear of law enforcement intervention in research was prevalent in the UK.

While it may be easier to overcome this concern when using university computers or masking an IP address, at times research on extremism and terrorism could still "stand up as an anomaly", as one ECR in North America (M11) put it – particularly, he underlined, if the work was unusual within a particular university department. In these cases, this researcher mentioned the need to use software such as The Onion Router (TOR), which essentially enables anonymous online activity with the goal of enabling "as much privacy as possible" by routing traffic "through multiple servers and encrypt[ing] it each step of the way" (TOR n.d.). Indeed, Universities UK's (2021) advice to researchers reminds them that even if they go through a university IP address, "visits to websites related to jihadism or terrorist websites and downloading of material issued by jihadist or terrorist groups (even from open-access sites) may be subject to monitoring by the police" (p.13).

Several interviewees admitted they had little idea where to start as regards measures to improve their online privacy, and could be more diligent about their online security. One interviewee at a North American university (M20) said he felt lucky he had not experienced issues to date, as he was not "as careful as [he] probably should be". Another North America-based researcher (F6, 30s) struggled when her team leader resisted her attempts to introduce technical precautions, such as not using personal phones, for research on the Islamic State's Telegram activity:

> So the person was just saying 'Oh, it's really safe. It's not a big deal.' I was like, 'No, no, I don't care. You can use your own phone, but that's not happening with me.' So I had a very hard [position which was that] I will not do this research unless

> *there are burner phones that are used, that are paid [for] with cash, like no traces or anything because I don't care how safe or how anonymous your phone number is, so to speak, I'm not gonna put myself at risk... And then as far as other security issues, I just made, make, sure and made sure at the time to try to use a VPN... The hard thing is, I guess, it's... Especially if you're with a team... and other people don't maybe necessarily follow similar protocol.*

For some, the adoption of more stringent security precautions was a necessary consequence of a credible threat reported to the police. A male researcher (M14, 40s) with six years' experience of researching online extremism and terrorism at a European university described the changes he had made since receiving such a threat from far-right actors:

> *I always have this personal alarm on me; like an alarm button. And everywhere I go, I have a GPS tracker, [showing] where I am, on the advice from the police. And then it's just this general feeling of care for your family, like, to take measures to remove any connections to your family online, stuff like that. So it's been a different experience.*

Other interviewees had also taken physical precautions as a result of their online research. On the basis of a threat from a jihadist actor, one interviewee, as mentioned in section 4.2.1, had a family member relocate to a different city. Following threats to her institution, another interviewee (F12, 20s, North America) described physical security measures that included keeping a weapon in her home:

> *I have a home security system... I have a knife...*
> *It is just, like, trying to make myself feel more*
> *in control. So, like, I've gone to a shooting range*
> *and figured out, you know... Like, become better*
> *at learning how firearms work and that kind of*
> *thing. I don't own a gun, but I've thought about*
> *it. I know a lot of people who do this work who*
> *do own guns and carry them all the time.*

Even though interviewees were generally conducting research in the online space, and not physically meeting research subjects, they were still cognisant of the potential risks to their own physical security and that of others around them and took precautions to avoid unnecessary physical harms.

Notably, four interviewees – two at think tanks and two at universities – remarked on the lack of physical security in their institutions. In particular, university buildings are often open to the public, and researchers' names and contact details can be posted online. To those working in them, even universities or organisations that are known centres for research on extremism and terrorism could sometimes feel vulnerable. This will be discussed further in the section on institutional responses.

4.3.2 Emotional Harms: Individual Coping Mechanisms

Twenty-seven interviewees reported that they had experienced issues and harms online, 22 describing them as significant. For many, those harms were emotional, as outlined earlier in the report. All of those who experienced harms had introduced changes to alleviate them, if they felt it necessary. Before coming, in section 4.4., to institutional steps taken to protect interviewees' well-being, this section explores the ways in which individuals sought to establish their own protections. It is clear that they regarded some of these measures as positive, *adaptive* (i.e., appropriate measures), and squarely addressing problems; for instance, talking to friends

and colleagues. Others were largely recognised as *maladaptive* and avoidant (i.e., coping mechanisms that were in themselves potentially problematic and unhealthy) (Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla 2005; Seiffge Krenke 2004). See Box 3 for an overview of the adaptive steps interviewees reported taking to protect their mental and emotional well-being.

MENTAL READINESS AS PROTECTION

The importance of mental preparation as protection from the harmful effects of graphic material was emphasised by a number of researchers. Consistent with the accounts of journalists working with online materials (Hight and Smyth 2014; Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal 2015), it was often the content seen when least expecting it that had the worst impact. As one PhD researcher (M9, 30s) at a British university noted:

> *Sometimes, I think these violent materials come up, all of a sudden, they don't warn you that... they are about to show graphic photos or images. So, it comes all of a sudden and what I usually do is turn my head when they come, but listen to the information that I want to get... But it's quite distressing... I mean, with time you will glean the experience of knowing when graphic materials are about to be shown. But in the initial stages you don't know when they are going to pop on and I am someone who has to see blood, someone who has to see torture [for my research]. And that is traumatising in itself.*

Another PhD candidate (F15, 20s) at a different British university agreed that avoiding 'surprise violence' was something you learned over time. Both this student and another in North America (F6)

Box 3. ADAPTIVE STEPS INTERVIEWEES TOOK TO PROTECT THEIR MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

- Worked during set hours (e.g., avoided checking devices in bed, whether in the early morning or late at night; where possible, avoided working outside of 'work hours', such as in the evenings or at weekends).

- Worked in a specific location that was not used for other purposes (e.g., leisure, sleeping).

- Did something that demarcated 'working' and 'not working' (e.g., donned and removed lab coat).

- Within their institution, requested a workspace in which PC/screen was not easily viewable by others so they did not have to keep 'looking over their shoulders' and worrying about traumatising others.

- Sought to take a scientific or analytical approach to content.

- Minimised screens when viewing extremist or terrorist content.*

- Reduced screen brightness when viewing extremist or terrorist content.*

- Reduced volume when listening to extremist or terrorist audio/video.*

- Watched content on a mobile phone as this has a small screen.

- If working in a team, talked to other team members about their work and its impacts on them.

- If working in isolation, reached out to others working on online extremism and terrorism, including via social media and/or at relevant conferences and other events.

- Took breaks from consuming harmful content, including hourly, daily, weekly or longer, depending on personal needs.

- Communicated the specific needs of and risks to online extremism and terrorism researchers to the press and marketing teams within their institutions.

- If in a position to do so, promoted the inclusion of a budget for researcher welfare-related services in relevant research planning and proposals.

- Got professional help (e.g., counselling), either via their institution or privately.

* If this was, for analytical purposes, not possible on first viewing/hearing, then did so on subsequent occasions.

described for instance how seeing someone in an orange suit being led in a certain way in an Islamic State video was a signal to stop watching, as an execution would most likely follow.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Recognising the harm caused by an erosion of work-life boundaries, another individual coping mechanism mentioned was the **setting of professional boundaries**. The details of this tactic varied immensely, but the common underlying element was making a decision as to how much stress was acceptable and how much was interfering with everyday life, and taking actions to avoid the latter.

Some researchers created **physical boundaries**, such as setting aside a special place to work in, a particular computer, a dedicated work time, and/or wearing particular clothes, such as, in one case, a lab coat that was removed after the research had been concluded for the day. One interviewee (M8, 30s) at a European university advised: "Have a special room for it. Have, if possible, a special computer for it. Have particular conditions for it."

Other researchers set **mental boundaries** such as not working shortly before bedtime, taking frequent breaks from the work (in the short term), or breaks from the topic (in the longer term). One senior academic (F5, 50s, North America) remarked, "You have to monitor yourself and one another and watch for signs that it is having an impact and [be] prepared to step away. You know, there needs to be a caution button on this stuff. It doesn't mean that you stop doing the work, but it may mean that you stop doing the work for a couple of days." In another example, an interviewee (M14, 40s, Europe) mentioned the need to socialise outside of the work environment: "I can't stress that enough: the importance of stepping out of a bubble that is really destructive to a large extent, and [continuing] to force oneself to talk and to be active in other parts of social life, or to *have* a social life."

WITHDRAWAL AND DISTANCING TACTICS

Withdrawal took various forms, including partial avoidance via the use of technical measures. Many researchers sought to avoid, as far as possible, the direct violence and gory aspects of the photo and

video data they were collecting and analysing. For example, they would **fast-forward** through the parts that were excessively bloody, would **skip** the beheading parts of videos, or would **pause material** if it got too intense. Others would **minimise the screen size or turn down the sound** to reduce the effects of certain scenes in videos. One UK-based PhD researcher (M4, 30s) said: "I watch a lot of stuff on my phone now. And I actually think that's quite a good place to watch traumatic or potentially traumatic material because it's a small screen that you can put to the corner of your eye or you can easily tilt it away." This tactic was one he had only lately developed, however. And as one doctoral researcher (F10, 30s, North America) pointed out, recognising the signs of stress and determining when to withdraw could be difficult. She recalled an instance when working on her PhD on jihadist groups:

> *I was transcribing a really violent video in the PhD room, and I was in a corner… so no one could see [the screen], but I was sitting there and a colleague came in and was like, 'Are you okay?' Like, literally, my leg was like bouncing out of my chair. So I was, like, 'Yep, you know I just need to turn this off and walk away.' And so, I think, in the moment, there was definitely, like, a psychological-physical reaction to what I was doing. But again, my coping mechanism, typically, is, I walk away and I think of something else.*

Knowing when to withdraw from research was something most interviewees discovered for themselves, over time, with some engaging in not just tactical but also strategic withdrawal. Several interviewees stopped doing research on violent videos completely. For instance, one researcher (M22, 30s, North America) who had studied violent jihad for over a decade said:

> *I stopped watching most of the videos just because I didn't want to, because it was just too much mental health-wise. I mean, I'll watch stuff that doesn't have the violence in it. But even some regular stuff, when they have nasheeds [a cappella jihadist songs] in the background… there's just something you can feel that just makes me anxious.*

Personal choices about what was tolerable also changed over time, and clearly varied from interviewee to interviewee, including as a result of pre-existing circumstances or vulnerabilities. Three interviewees talked to REASSURE about pre-existing mental health issues, or trauma, noting that such experiences had helped them understand better how to create healthy working environments and help themselves. As one ECR (F2, 20s, North America) noted, "I have learning disabilities[8] and, like, as an adult, do cognitive behavioural therapy. So, I think that I feel more prepared probably than most people to acquire what I need… when I need help to get help. Perhaps for people who haven't had that in their past, maybe it would be more difficult." All interviewees said that it would be beneficial to remove the stigma in the field around discussing emotional and psychological issues.

Academia also provided an important **professional framework** in which researchers could **cognitively distance** themselves from potentially distressing material. Interviewees mentioned that they coped with the violent and hateful aspects of material studied by focusing on the theoretical frameworks and analytical processes involved in their research. One doctoral researcher (F15, 20s, UK) described how she protected herself:

8   In a North American context, 'learning disabilities' refers to neurological differences such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, see https://ldaamerica.org/types-of-learning-disabilities. In the UK, 'neurodiversity' is a term that applies to all those with neurological differences including what are known as Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), see www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexia/neurodiversity-and-co-occurring-differences.

I deliberately don't watch anything that I feel I don't need to; that's not necessary for my research. So, for example, for my research, I'm most interested in the way in which the victim versus the executioner are framed: if they have different physical positions, their features, for example – that's what I'm interested in. I'm not interested in the moment that the knife meets the skin or the execution itself...
So that's something that I will often pause and just not look at. If I've seen it once I do not need to see it again.

Eight interviewees (20%) advised creating analytical distance from the material. One non-Muslim researcher at a private institution (M5, 40s, Europe) noted the importance of understanding the theological justifications for violence in his work on jihadism. He said, "It was a learning by doing... The online research, of course, includes aspects of violence that are... easier to cope with, in my personal experience, when the filmed violence can be understood from the jihadist motivation and legitimacy." He believed his knowledge of the Arabic language helped in this. Another (M8, 30s, Europe) advised: "Stay scientific at all times. If you can't be scientific, don't watch it." However, analytical distance is often entwined with identity and privilege. As Conway (2021) notes, "Prolonged and repeated exposure to content that denigrates or otherwise egregiously offends one or more of researchers' core identity characteristics renders detachment effectively out of the hands of some researchers ... [T]hey are always already 'participants'" (p.370). Scientific distance is not an option for some researchers, for instance those who come from the minority groups targeted by the extremists studied.

ADAPTIVE AND MALADAPTIVE DISTRACTIONS

Interviewees noted both adaptive and maladaptive distractions among their different coping mechanisms. Popular positive distractions included watching television shows that were unrelated

to the topic; as one senior academic (F5, 50s) in North America said, "We have many, many *Game of Thrones* fans around here, since it's a fantasy world that you can just sort of immerse yourself in." Others mentioned hobbies such as art, faith and spirituality, and exercise as useful in terms of psychological self-care; others mentioned watching silly online videos of, for example, cats. One interviewee (M15) mentioned the importance of nature and walking by the sea.

Another coping mechanism was humour. Moderators of social media content have long noted the importance of irony and dark humour, even though this might normalise disturbing content and could be considered maladaptive (Chen 2014; Arsht and Etcovitch 2018). Dark humour was a coping mechanism mentioned by twelve (30%) REASSURE interviewees. A representative observation was made by a doctoral researcher (F6, 30s, North America) who said: "Humour is used to make really bad jokes [like] 'It's not a normal day because I haven't seen a beheading'… And I mean, you know, no one else would understand that. But for us, we're like, 'Oh, yeah, okay. Okay!'" While interviewees acknowledged dark humour as a long-term and organic coping mechanism, some were nonetheless concerned that this was unhealthy and perhaps maladaptive and harmful – to themselves or to others. One experienced academic (F8, 40s, North America) explained her concern when on one occasion her own black humour potentially risked student welfare:

> *This is a terrible story but I'm going to tell you… So when I taught the terrorism course, sometimes I am not the most sensitive person and I never gave my students, like, warnings about content. And I would put up images and, you know, I did tell them at the beginning of the course 'You might see some things', but I didn't re-warn them every time. And so, one time, there was an Islamic State image of a Yezidi guy and woman. And there was*

> *an Islamic State guy that was posing with them. Basically, he was posing with his arms around their headless corpses... His catchphrase was 'hanging with my homies'. And I forgot that was in my slide deck. And every time I saw it, I would burst out laughing because I'm – twisted. And the students were literally, like, 'UGH,' and of course we had to then, you know, go through the whole thing of like, contextualising it and sort of making them okay after... after I traumatised them.*

In this case, desensitisation caused by continued exposure to images of brutality had created a boundary that separated this interviewee's responses from those of students who had not been routinely exposed to such material. In fact, 14 interviewees (36%) described no longer being affected by the material they encountered, owing to desensitisation. As one researcher, an expert (M22, 30s, North America) on violent jihadism, commented, "I guess I'm kind of numb to it now". Desensitisation is a noted outcome of long-term engagement with difficult materials, as already discussed in section 4.2.3. As with the incident above, some researchers worried that their desensitisation resulted in students being exposed to harmful materials. Another senior scholar in North America (F5, 50s) explained her concerns: "I put a video on the final exam and it had a beheading in it, but I didn't see it. Like, I literally, I honestly, I *saw* it, I vet all these videos [but] my brain did not process it. And that really scared me; the fact that I *looked* at it and didn't *see* it." She feared a change in her cognitive function, due to prolonged exposure to brutal imagery.

A doctoral student (F6, 30s, North America) gave the student perspective on this type of staff-student dissonance. She described the gap between her own response to jihadist material and that of more experienced colleagues, when she started out in this research area:

> *There were a couple of times that there were things that happened within the team; interactions that I found really inappropriate. So, I think my first video of an execution that had to be analysed, there were two other team members with me and they had watched many of these videos before, so they were very desensitised. But I understand people use humour to deal with traumatic issues and, I have to say, I'm not blaming anyone. But I remember people making jokes about 'grabbing the popcorn' and stuff and it was just – it was not okay. Just… Because this is not some holiday movie… I remember thinking, 'Oh, I hope I don't ever get… I don't want to become that.' Like, I know I'm desensitised to an extent, [but] I don't want to get so desensitised that I no longer look at this as [if] it's real.*

In this case, colleagues' routine response to violence served as a salutary warning. This student's response raises questions about **the long-term impacts and potential harms of desensitisation, including dark humour as a maladaptive psychological strategy** developed over time.

Humour was used for more than coping with brutality. Another PhD candidate (M1, 30s, UK) described his exposure to far-right videos over a period of months: "It's a difficult thing because it wasn't like we were watching execution videos. But… the default thing of what me and the other researcher got into was just making jokes out [of it], which I'm very well aware might not be the healthiest thing." This interviewee also suggested his gender might have acted as a barrier to using more adaptive strategies such as talking, rather than joking, about the material. He acknowledged that talking would have been healthier. Although humour emerged as a coping mechanism across career stages, it also revealed boundaries within the field that created a divide between those who 'understood' and

those who did not; those 'with experience' and those without; those who could cope and those who could not. Dark humour was also recognised, therefore, as one aspect of a wider macho research culture that was at times negative, gendered, and harmful, where jokes felt more acceptable than honest conversation. This macho culture is discussed further in section 4.3.3.

4.3.3 Talking Things Through: Community Support

> *[Researchers] having negative reactions to what they're encountering is not unusual, and they should not be afraid to speak up and seek help if necessary… It doesn't necessarily mean an end to their project. So, I think it's about lowering the threshold for people speaking up.*
>
> **M19, 40s, UK, on how important it is that ECRs talk**

> *This is completely cathartic. Because we don't ever talk about this. I don't know if that's your experience, but we don't ever actually talk about this experience with anybody.*
>
> **F5, 50s, North America, on talking to REASSURE**

This sub-section explores talking as a means of coping. We found that how interviewees identified community affected who they turned to for support. As will be clear, much of the support relied on by researchers is informal and unfunded. In our sub-field, it is colleagues, rather than therapists or other relevant professionals, who provide support.

As outlined in the previous sub-sections, interviewees coped in a variety of ways with the negative effects of their research. One important source of support was like-minded colleagues: people to share a joke with. This sub-section therefore begins by considering the role colleagues and peers play in support, and follows that by looking at (non-)reliance on family or friends, or those outside the field of online extremism and terrorism research.

INFORMAL SUPPORT: COLLEAGUES WHO "GET IT"

Interviewees with a long involvement in online extremism and terrorism research uniformly believed that **the current focus on potential harms caused by the work was positive**. An experienced researcher of jihadist content (M22, 30s, North America) noted that the research community is considerably more "mature" now than it was in the 2000s, when there was no real consideration of the ethical issues at play. Another interviewee (F12, 20s, North America) nonetheless noted how slowly the field had become more professional, in terms of understanding the risks involved and the effect they can have on researchers' mental health. And other interviewees said that they still avoided talking about such issues, precisely in order to cope: talking, they believed, sometimes made them focus more on their existing stress, making things worse, not better.

Peer networks are a recognised source of support, used by journalists, humanitarian workers, and others to protect from vicarious trauma (Pearlman and McKay 2008). Indeed, REASSURE interviewees overwhelmingly pointed to colleagues within the sub-discipline as their most important source of support in dealing with the harms discussed in the previous sections. Twenty of them (51%) told REASSURE they would confide in colleagues before anyone else. The study of extremism and terrorism, as a specific subject area, mattered in forming bonds that enabled trust and the sharing of experiences. One experienced academic (F5, 50s, North America) spoke of the importance of the wider academic community to her team: "You walk into those conferences and it's like 'Holy crap! There's other people doing this', you know? We're not alone; there's

a community. And that sense of community has so buoyed us ever since the first one we went to." Events were important in reminding her of the wider community working on the same difficult content, even if she did not routinely discuss the personal harms of her work.

Research project teams were a particularly important source of support. Several interviewees said that they would proactively check in with colleagues and other researchers when working on a research project together. Interviewees also mentioned the need to be proactive about offering support to others, especially to more junior or less experienced staff, even if such precautions were not formally mandated by the university or research institution. One interviewee (M9, 30s, UK) noted that, at a previous institution, he had felt a very strong connection to his small team of approximately half a dozen researchers, to the point where he referred to this group as "family". He contrasted this with a subsequent institution, where there were few other researchers studying the same topics – he felt this meant fewer people with whom to share experiences.

Peer connections did not have to be 'in-person'. Long before COVID-19, social media provided interviewees with important virtual communities, some of which were highlighted as providing help around self-care issues. One interviewee (M22, 30s, North America) reflected on a friendship with another researcher who would regularly check in on him via Twitter to make sure that he was "staying sane" while engaging with large quantities of extremist content. The online community was often helpful with practical as well as emotional support. One interviewee (M11, 30s, North America) described how, when his Telegram account was deactivated, colleagues in the field offered to contact the company to provide proof of his identity and of the validity of his research.

Given the emotional difficulties of the research outlined so far, those outside the sub-field might assume a therapist could be the best source of support. However, REASSURE's findings challenge the notion of therapy as the most important and accessible resource for researchers. **Interviewees preferred colleagues who had first-hand experience of these issues, to therapists.** Interviewees believed that

the explicitly brutal nature of the work meant more specific, tailored expertise was needed for handling this topic; those who had sought therapy had not found such expertise. A PhD researcher in North America (F7, 20s) noted:

> *For the most part when I go to see, like,*
> *a therapist at my institution, I'm not going*
> *to talk very much about the work I do, because*
> *it depresses the therapist... And so, if the university*
> *wanted to really support people who are doing*
> *work on traumatic subjects, they would need*
> *to actually be hiring therapists or counsellors who*
> *specialise in this particular area, who are, you know,*
> *not going to be, like, appalled and confused and*
> *be the ones asking questions like 'What is this*
> *terrible work that you do?'*

Eight interviewees had utilised institutional counselling services. However, echoing the above observation, 11 interviewees (28%) noted that institutional therapists – and not all institutions offered therapy – were too generalist, an observation echoing participants in an earlier VOX-Pol report on ethics in online extremism and terrorism research (Mahlouly 2019). REASSURE interviewees said that connecting with colleagues doing similar research was of considerable importance. For instance, one interviewee (M14, 40s, Europe) said it was crucial to him "to have continuous conversations with fellow researchers around Europe who do similar things. And we share the same experiences and we help each other in how we can best cope with this type of work". Another likely factor here, of course, is the fact that colleagues are far more accessible than therapists, and do not charge to talk. That said, a number of interviewees had sought out **therapy and counselling** services, but found that only some of their institutions provided them. Four had paid for private therapy, but

others without institutional well-being services could not afford it. The provision of these services is examined in section 4.4, on institutional mechanisms to help researchers cope.

While the community of online extremism and terrorism scholars was largely seen as a resource, not everyone felt included. A minority of interviewees (three, or 8%) suggested that they **lacked a clear community**. Some scholars are at institutions where many others are studying political violence, some are the only researcher within their organisation working in this field. Reflecting on his previous difficulties, one interviewee (M2, 30s, North America) said it was problematic that, as a young scholar, he had not had a wide network of individuals who understood the nature of the content. Moving forward he was keen to find other people who knew the subject area, with whom he could articulate traumatic experiences. The PhD student (F7, 20s, North America) cited previously, who did not want to see a "generalist" therapist, also lamented not having a community of researchers who studied the same topic at her institution. She suggested that scholars should consider this as a factor when choosing where to go for work or study. The same interviewee expressed a desire for formalised support networks; she believed inter-institutional associations should scale up and fund networks of like-minded scholars to focus on researcher welfare issues. This was echoed by another interviewee (M6, 30s, North America), who noted that although there were people at his institution who studied "fucked-up shit" in other disciplines, he would be unlikely to speak to those scholars about self-care unless they were all working on a project together. This early-career researcher suggested that instead, as his first port of call, he would reach out to well-known scholars in the wider extremism and terrorism studies sub-field.

Initial isolation, before they meet other online extremism and terrorism researchers at conferences or on social media, means early-career researchers can struggle. A number of REASSURE interviewees noted that **their ability to find people to talk to in the field only developed over time**. The (now senior) researcher (M2, 30s, North America) who described trauma due to the violent death of jihadist research participants in conflict is someone who

actively mentors ECRs in online extremism and terrorism research, often via social media. This is a direct result of his own experiences. Yet when he himself experienced grief due to the death of his jihadist participants, he felt he had no one to turn to: "I was a bit of an outsider; I was new to Twitter. And so I didn't feel like I just, you know, I can just go to people... and be like, 'Hey, I just talked to a guy who died, I'm kind of upset'... I didn't have friends in the field [then] as I do now." The majority of REASSURE interviewees agreed it takes time to develop trust and supportive bonds, online or off.

By contrast, some interviewees were concerned they might cause distress to colleagues if they shared their issues. One PhD researcher (F11, 40s, North America) suggested terrorism research brings a certain responsibility towards others in the field, saying "I don't want to necessarily word-vomit all my anxiety all over someone else who's also very anxious about this as well. You know, 'the wounded helping the wounded' [is] sometimes not necessarily great." While the community of 'those who know' does matter in sharing experiences, it could also hinder open communication for **fear of burdening colleagues**. This fear of sharing trauma – of creating the *vicarious trauma* already noted earlier in this report – is also documented in the field of counselling and therapy. Isolation and lack of communication can result (Trippany, White Kress, and Allen Wilcoxon 2004).

BARRIERS TO SHARING WITH COLLEAGUES: MACHISMO IN TERRORISM STUDIES

Despite the largely positive feedback regarding the supportive online extremism and terrorism researcher community, some interviewees said there were barriers to sharing among colleagues and within the wider community.

Around a fifth of interviewees (8) observed a **culture of 'macho bravado' surrounding the viewing of violent terrorist content in the wider terrorism studies community**. One interviewee (F6, 30s, North America) observed how this was institutionalised, recalling an occasion when she was studying for her PhD at a North American university and another student had tried to protect herself while coding:

> *She didn't want to see any content that was gory or gruesome, which I thought was good, because she knew what her limits were. Some of the professors weren't very happy with that, they sort of said 'Oh, you know, she should know what she's getting herself into' and 'how can she say that?' Unfortunately, there was a very gruesome image and she completely flipped out. There was not a lot of compassion on the professors' side, which I did not find okay.*

Another ECR (M4, 30s, UK) felt similar views were prevalent in the sub-field's broader culture, remarking that he found it annoying that researchers would take to Twitter to tweet condescendingly along the lines of "we watch it [violent material], so you don't have to", further stating: "It's not cool to watch this stuff. It's not cool to see people being killed. And it's just – it really, really grinds my gears." A male think-tank researcher (M7, 30s, Europe) who had studied in the UK said he had watched jihadist propaganda as a graduate student and that this "seemed like a badge of honour... showing how tough you are and that you don't really care". He considered that viewing such material was not just about a desire for knowledge, it was also competitive, "because 'everyone is watching this' and you kind of talked about it a lot". Another interviewee, with more than ten years in the sub-field (M22, 30s, North America), had also experienced this bravado. His advice for new scholars was: "Don't feel like you have to look at this content to feel like you belong in this field... Don't feel compelled to look at violent stuff just for the sake of it; like, it's stupid." How the academic community discusses violent material and its value to the researcher, and how violent content is collectively understood, is clearly important. Many perceived as unhelpful a macho culture that regarded this content as 'cool' and/or within which people felt pressure to watch the most brutal material.

A number of interviewees raised the issue of the wider, informal culture of the terrorism studies community as a barrier to well-being. Some suggested the terrorism studies community itself could be actively harmful, with academic **bullying** a problem. One interviewee (M4, 30s, UK) had considered carefully whether he should speak about self-care issues in public, because when he had done so previously, a prominent member of the community had publicly attacked him for being 'weak' and told him to stop complaining. Indeed, it was not uncommon for interviewees to feel guilty about reporting harms: they were well aware that this field of study was their own choice, and that they were not physically located in a conflict zone. Another interviewee (F2, 20s, North America) agreed that the field needs to be more sensitive and reflective about how we treat people in general: "I think that our field really struggles sometimes in terms of behaviour and bullying and basic inter-personal professional-level things." This researcher also suggested that there was a degree of hypocrisy at play, in that some of the individuals who bully are the ones who publicly advocate for more awareness of, and research on, the welfare of online extremism and terrorism researchers.

AVOIDING TALKING TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS

The pros and cons of confiding in colleagues aside, the distressing nature of online extremism and terrorism could raise a barrier between those researching it and people who had never been exposed to such content. Only a minority of interviewees therefore reported that family, friends, or partners were their first port of call when managing distress caused by their work. This is distinct from, for example, online creators/influencers surveyed regarding their experiences with online hate and harassment, 70% of whom reported reaching out to friends and family for help (Thomas et al. 2022). However, it is consistent with the findings of a small study of law-enforcement professionals tasked with analysing online extremist and terrorist content, who also avoided seeking support from family/friends when negatively impacted by their work, largely for fear of traumatising them (Reeve 2020).

Some REASSURE interviewees observed that non-work networks did not, and could not, understand the nature of the work. One experienced researcher (M2, 30s, North America) observed: "I didn't really know how to give [friends] enough background information on the project so they'd understand what I was saying." This was echoed by a think tank-based scholar (M7, 30s, Europe) who said that discussing these issues was possible only where people had a similar knowledge base; this did not include his family or non-work friends.

Many interviewees felt that the violent and/or otherwise repugnant nature of the materials studied made it difficult to share their issues with loved ones. One doctoral student (M8, 30s, Europe) said, "This is something you don't really talk about over coffee... You can't say, 'I watched so many people being decapitated today. I know exactly what it looks like when a throat is cut and the tongue is falling out underneath.'" Another PhD student (M1, 30s, UK) noted that he was not inclined to share the "grizzlier" side of his research with anyone who did not work in the same or similar fields, suggesting instead that he would go to his supervisor if he had a problem. An experienced researcher (M22, 30s, North America) also said that he did not want to burden family members: "I don't want to bother them with it... They don't need to know the extent of [it] – I don't want to scare them." In this case the 'extent' included death threats from jihadist actors and some PTSD-like symptoms.

This avoidant approach was widespread, but not adopted by all interviewees. Two described family or friends as their main support. One senior researcher (M3, 40s, Europe) noted that, as well as discussing self-care issues with his former doctoral supervisor, he occasionally talked to his wife about broader ideological questions – such as how people can believe in radical ideologies – if the content was not too emotionally taxing. Another interviewee (F15, 20s, UK) said she did not consider herself the type of person to seek out institutional support, but she was able to confide in her mother, and also her partner – who had first-hand experience of trauma work. On the other hand, an experienced US-based interviewee (M16) reported that he had been quoted in jihadist propaganda, and had told some family members. The researcher

described the experience of being quoted by Islamic State as "unnerving", but his family members were much more concerned, understanding it as an indirect threat.

4.4 INSTITUTIONS, RESPONSIBILITY, AND DUTY OF CARE

A clear finding of this report is that support mechanisms and networks for online extremism and terrorism researchers were felt to be too informal. REASSURE interviewees were asked about both the formal and informal institutional support they received, with six (15%) noting that official institutional support was absent and 12 (31%) reflecting that they would like a more formalised support network. This was partly why, as outlined in the previous section, interviewees regarded informal mechanisms, evolved organically, as so important. This situation contrasts with that of those employed directly by the major tech companies – as opposed to contractors – and in law enforcement. Social media and tech companies are increasingly aware of the role they must play in protecting employees exposed to harmful materials online, and providing support for them. Indeed, the importance of institutional responsibility is highlighted by court cases brought by former content moderators, contracted by major social media companies, who claimed they had suffered PTSD and psychological harm due to unsafe working practices linked to exposure to extreme content, both violent and sexual (Arsht and Etcovitch 2018; Beckett 2018).

This section sets out what REASSURE interviewees reported about institutional responses, including **shortcomings as well as supports. This includes the role institutions' (lack of) responses played as a source of stress, and even harm, to researchers.** In particular, interviewees discussed **the role of Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) or Internal Review Boards (IRBs)**. The picture was negative: REASSURE found HRECs and IRBs regarded as either (at best) irrelevant, lacking expert knowledge, risk-averse, and deprioritising researcher risk, or (at worst) blocking research and being potentially harmful for researchersafety and well-being.

The section begins with interviewees' reflections on how their institutions dealt with the worst security threats and risks they faced, as set out in section 4.2.1 on harms. It follows up by examining the availability and nature of well-being supports, especially counselling; access to legal advice; and the importance of dedicated work spaces.

4.4.1 Institutional Security Practices

In the case of the most serious death threats, REASSURE interviewees said research institutions – universities, think tanks and government institutes – had taken responsibility for researcher safety. Threats were referred to state authorities, who initiated police patrols or other actions. The interviewee who endured perhaps the most imminent death threat was working for a British think tank, as well as studying for a PhD, when the incident occurred. This person reflected on the care provided at their place of work, the think tank, which took the lead in safeguarding:

> *They set up a crisis management committee within an hour of the report, swung into action. And the first thing they did was reassure me that they were with me all through this and ready to support me in any way they could. Then two days later – the threat was on the Friday, [so] the following Monday – I was invited by the head of the organisation [to meet], and I discussed with him how they could support me, and he also reassured me that he was with me on this, including with helping me keep my family safe in [the country from which the jihadist threat had emanated]. And the next thing was they, practically, reported it to the Metropolitan Police and to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Yeah, and so for that day, for example, I wasn't*

> *allowed to go home on my own. A car was hired to take me home. So, I think they gave fair support both emotionally and practically – and financially.*

Three interviewees told REASSURE that their institutions had introduced new security protocols because of their work. In a fourth case, a British university instituted a range of security measures to restrict the public's access to campus, hoping to minimise the possibility of physical attack from extreme actors who had become an increasing threat. A leading academic affected (M19, 40s, UK) explained how this came about:

> *There were concerns, I would say not so much by us, but by a lot of people around us, that [a colleague] would be attacked or that they would come for us. And, as a result of that, the college introduced a number of security measures that, basically, made it more difficult for people to come on campus and find us.*

To some degree, however, he felt this was box-ticking, and he did not believe that the university could fully protect staff working on terrorism, saying:

> *I had no doubt that if someone wanted to kill us, or find us, they would be able to do that. I mean, even if you remove the sign from our office door, that doesn't really stop a terrorist determined to find us and to harm us.*

He underlined that this was a wider issue, extending beyond his own institution, because of academics having public profiles and being associated with publicly accessible institutions.

Whether effective or not, such measures were seen as positive and protective. Other interviewees, meanwhile, suggested that their institutions actually put them at risk. In particular, they reported that **particular teams within their institutions did not understand their work, or its practical security implications, and that this could create harms**. A doctoral student (F17, 20s, UK) noted that her institution's marketing team had used her image in publicising her work, believing researcher images generated good online traction. A marketing tweet disseminating one of the interviewee's publications therefore carried a large visual of her face. The researcher had to explain that she did not use her image publicly, because as she was a young woman working on far-right radicalisation it could lead to online harassment, something she had already experienced. She said, "I think they just never thought about it in that way, because it's something that they just do for all the teams. But not all the teams have the dangers that we have."

Poor institutional responses were not confined to academia. Our sample of individuals who had previously worked for think tanks was small, but they also highlighted **poor working practices in this setting**. One interviewee (M4, 30s, UK) worked for a think tank in what he described as a "rough and tumble, do-it-yourself" situation, in which the institution made no effort to oversee good research practice but pressured them to do "sexy work" that would receive media attention. Another (M12, 30s, Europe), who worked for a different think tank, said that his management offered "no support at all", which he felt was "terrible". Both researchers have since moved to academic institutions, and stated that their treatment was better there.

4.4.2 Well-being, Counselling, and Therapists

The majority of REASSURE interviewees raised therapy as a means of mitigating mental and emotional harms arising from online extremism and terrorism research. The institutional provision of therapy and counselling services was found to be patchy. **For some, there was good provision; for others, it was far more ad hoc.**

For a number of interviewees, there was simply no support at all. Interviewees directly correlated this absence with their reliance on talking to colleagues, already discussed. For example, the interviewee who noted above that he worked at a think tank where management offered no support (M12, 30s, Europe) also stated that this led him to work out his issues with colleagues because "we were all in it together".

Sometimes institutions promised well-being services, but did not deliver. One interviewee (F9, 40s, Europe) said her institution acknowledged that she should be in receipt of mental and emotional support and security training, but three and a half years later the support had still not materialised. In this case, the researcher attributed the lack of support to organisational incompetence. The mere availability of well-being or counselling services within an institution did not, however, mean that interviewees felt able to access them easily, or that they were the most appropriate resource when challenges arose. A professor (M18, 40s) at a British university noted that his institution did offer well-being services, but he also suggested that it was not his first port of call if he ran into self-care issues; as with other interviewees, informal conversations with peers (and/or supervisors) usually preceded seeking formal help, if such a resource was available.

In cases where counselling services were available, the means of delivery differed substantially across institutions, whether it was internally or externally provided. Eight interviewees (21%) said such services were offered internally by their institution and that they took advantage of them. Another interviewee (M17, 20s, UK) noted that his institution part-funded private counselling to help

navigate dealing with difficult content. Four interviewees (around 10%), however, reported that they themselves had borne the full cost of private counselling.

The mechanisms for accessing such support also varied. **In particular, three interviewees felt institutional offers of therapy were too reactive.** This reactive approach meant that interviewees were sometimes unsure whether or not support was available until they actually needed it, by which time they were in a crisis situation. Several interviewees suggested that their institutions should be more proactive in making help accessible to staff and students. One (M12, 30s, Europe) said, "Universities should be investing in these kinds of services… not to make it… that you have to ask for it, but you can find it if you need it. I don't think I would have found anything relevant if I [had] needed it." Another interviewee (M20, 30s, North America) reported that his university did provide therapy on site, but it was not well publicised. He said, "These are types of conversations that aren't really had in [*sic*] the department level… I just haven't seen it. It's something we need to have more of a discussion around." Experienced interviewees believed that if *they* were not aware of where to go for help until they actually needed it, more junior researchers would be especially disadvantaged, as they might not want to admit to needing help.

There was also institutional inequality when it came to who was offered free well-being services. The resources varied between staff and students, with students sometimes ill-served by institutions that provided good well-being access for paid staff. This was illustrated by an interviewee (F10, 30s, North America) who contrasted her previous experience as a doctoral student, where she was not offered help as she was not an employee, with her experience once in full-time employment, where "anything I do is supported by work, so if I wanted it [counselling], I could have it. It's not pushed. But it's, you know, always there on the table as part of, you know, the benefits we get". On the other hand, a North America-based professor (M16, 40s) noted that his university did offer student-focused

counselling services, but to his knowledge there was little or nothing available on the employee side, admitting that he believed he himself could have done more to advocate for this in the past.

Interviewees gave various reasons for a reluctance to seek out well-being services or therapy when these were offered. One concern observed in the UK related to the subject material that would be discussed, and the **possibility of a legal risk or a risk to the research**. One ECR (F13, 40s) at a British university recalled concerns about talking to a therapist during her PhD studies, when she was interviewing supporters of a jihadist group. In the UK, support for Islamic State is a terrorist offence:

> *I had issues around, 'What can I actually say?' Because what it felt like is, 'This is all sensitive, and do I want to be talking to you [about it]?' I don't know that some, sort of, random therapist is not going to be alarmed by something I say or might report [it to the police]. I would think that, even if it was well-being services in a university, I would have some nervousness around the kinds of things that were disclosed.*

Three interviewees said that they were aware of services, but these had **long waiting lists**. One university professor (F4, 40s, UK) explained that the existing counselling services tended to be "very, very overburdened" and that they were intended for students in crisis, rather than an ongoing practice of researcher self-care. Because of this, the professor did not routinely direct her supervisees to these services. A PhD student (M1, 30s, UK) at a different university made the same point, stating that "from what I understand, it's not something that you could access quickly if you needed it". Similarly, a researcher (F7, 30s) at a North American

institution noted that mental health services were provided as part of her job, but access took a long time to arrange and the services were, anyway, mediocre.

A number of interviewees discussed the quality and appropriateness of counselling, psychological, and/or well-being services. As already noted, eleven interviewees (28%) believed the **counsellors provided were generalists and not adequately trained to deal with people traumatised by graphic violence**. This issue has been raised in previous writing and research on this topic, including by online extremism and terrorism researchers (Mahlouly 2019), but also by relevant law enforcement professionals (Reeve 2020). One REASSURE interviewee, a PhD researcher (F6, 40s) at a North American university, noted that her studies began with an introductory talk by a university counsellor. Initially positive, when the student explained the types of content she was looking at, "the counsellor looked horrified, and you could tell that they had no background for how to actually deal with that". Similarly, an academic (F1, 30s) at a British university said she wanted more bespoke counselling, feeling "normal" counsellors were not trained for this kind of work. As with other interviewees, this led to a reliance on her colleagues, rather than formal services. Reflecting on his PhD on the far right, one North America-based interviewee (M6, 30s) said he had used an institutional service for support, but because it was non-specialist he instead discussed matters of researcher self-care with members of the research community. He said, "If I were to just go to a random counsellor, they might be trained in family issues or substance abuse issues, which is going to give them no particular expertise [here]. How will they help this person who has watched all these terrible videos or read all of these terrible website posts?" Another interviewee (F15, 20s, UK) noted that, during her PhD, she was signposted towards her institution's counselling service, but she did not use it because, again, the counselling was generalised and not focused on conflict or terrorism researchers.

As noted earlier in this report, this lack of specialist counsellors mattered: interviewees not only felt, first, that they would not be understood, but also, secondly, that they

might traumatise the therapist. This doctoral researcher (M4, 30s) described the complex experience of seeking help for PTSD symptoms at his British university:

> *The counsellor that I saw, as you would expect, had not been trained in this specific area, so how to help someone deal with seeing people having their heads cut off and that kind of thing. And when I broach the subject of that and... I think, I mean, for me, one of the most useful things to do to try to process my way through a video or a trauma associated with the videos is to talk in detail about what happens. And I basically did that during a counselling session... And they're like, 'Yeah, go ahead', and it ended up kind of traumatising the counsellor in a way that made me feel even more like a freak, because I didn't have the very visceral reaction that she had. And she hadn't even seen it, which is not, again, like, really not, a reflection on her as a counsellor, or the counselling service writ large. It's just, I think, when talking about this stuff with a professional in this area, they can't just be any professional.*

Again, it was important to be able to confide in someone for whom the material itself would not be shocking or traumatising. Most universities offering counselling could not provide subject-specific services, and this impacted on the effectiveness of the help. Another British PhD candidate (F17, 20s), at a different university, reported:

> *We – myself and one other PhD student – were told to go to our well-being session… which I feel, like, our department, the heart was in the right place. They realised what we were doing and they wanted to support us. But the person they sent us to hadn't actually looked at any of the propaganda that we had. So, although the heart was in the right place, their intentions were good, they wanted to give us support: I just didn't really feel like I got anything out of it.*

This key observation – that specialised online extremism and terrorism research might require specialist therapy – led some of the more senior academics interviewed by REASSURE to provide, or make plans to provide, tailored counselling on some projects. A lead on university-based research projects in the US (F5, 50s) described her approach, which was to fund services to protect those students working with her:

> *Once we started working with undergraduates, we have written into all of those grants money for – and we did the research on this – clinical social workers with special training on PTS… We argued very strenuously in the grant that got us this project that, even though we're not doing an IRB for these kids, because they're working for us – they're not human subjects – if you have an ethical responsibility toward your human subjects, [then it's] that much more so to your students. And, so, we got money so that the whole team would sit down with this social worker, this clinician social worker, a couple of times as a team.*

Care for more junior members of the team also led to recognition of the ways in which senior staff had, over the years, become – perhaps harmfully, they suggested – desensitised to violence. One recommendation for programme leads identified by REASSURE, therefore, is to **build support into project funding and budgets and potentially to provide – even perhaps mandate – regular therapy as part of a project**. Indeed, one think tank employee (M10, 30s, Europe) reported how his institution introduced regular discussion sessions with a professional, which were very helpful:

> *[Eventually] they realised what kind of content I am looking at online. So I think they got more aware that it's probably not a good thing. So the boss was telling me I should have breaks. And that was definitely okay. But there were no big structures at the time. And in 2018 I got offered supervision with psychologists that we work with. That definitely helped me. And now we have regular interventions to talk about what issues we face.*

Another European think tank employee (M7) also reported the availability of psychological support. He said, however: "I could ask for supervision and… that's also always, kind of, built into the project. But so far, I feel like we haven't needed it. And it's also maybe there's a little bit of a stigma attached to it." This, he noted, meant that nobody had asked for it so far. Interviewees indicating the provision of support, however, were less common than perceptions of its absence (i.e., by six interviewees). Clearly, if well-being services are not offered, or are offered but are not adopted because researchers either perceive them as inadequate or fear being stigmatised, the responsibility and **emotional labour of providing care is pushed back onto the research community that is seeking help**, potentially leaving this community more isolated. Mandatory counselling, by contrast, removes this responsibility, and the stigma.

4.4.3 Availability of Legal Advice

Psychological counselling was not the only type of support that interviewees felt should be provided via their institutions. As noted in the section on harms, legal matters were also a concern, with numerous interviewees pointing to the need for training or assistance. Some interviewees described occasions on which their institutions had indeed provided legal support. One researcher (F9, 40s, Europe) experienced unwanted attention after presenting her research in the media, including a large number of freedom of information (FOI) requests. She recalled how her European institution provided lawyers who helped her respond to the FOIs, as well as connecting her to a security service which she could call 24/7 if she felt unsafe. Another academic researcher (M2, 30s, North America) said his university lawyers became involved in his work. The university then drew on his case to adapt its ethics procedure and used it as a "teachable moment", discussing it at conferences. Despite these positive accounts, many felt that there needed to be a greater onus on institutions to handle legal and security matters, including by making relevant legal advice available when necessary.

This was particularly urgent where the possession of extremist and terrorist online content could be illegal, as in the UK. One UK-based PhD candidate (M9, 30s) said, "What matters the most for me as a priority is the legal aspect... getting clear legal guidance on, when am I working as a researcher, when am I falling on the wrong side of the law?" However, he felt the onus to make this clear was on the government as much as his institution. For one interviewee (M8, 30s, Europe), the risk he had run during his studies was clear only after the event. He said, "I went to America during that time and I went to the UK... And it never occurred to me that you could get [into] a lot of trouble if you're stopped. Especially going to America... because you're, technically, moving propaganda around. So, that was one of the things that I didn't really think about until later." He felt lucky to have escaped arrest.

A senior academic with a background in law (M18, 40s, UK) also noted the importance of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the context of risks for students and staff doing, in their case, Twitter research, as fines for misusing data could be high:

> *I think one of the key issues that we had to deal with head-on in terms of GDPR was when it came to presenting the findings and publishing the results... We wanted to be able to say who it was that tweeted it... And we weren't sure whether we were on safe ground from a GDPR perspective, naming these individuals that posted these tweets. So that was a challenge. And then, ultimately, we were able to get some legal advice on whether we could name those users or not. I didn't expect the GDPR to be easy to navigate, but it was even more difficult to navigate than anticipated.*

This academic was the only interviewee who mentioned GDPR as a research risk requiring legal advice, which suggests that knowledge levels about GDPR-related risks were not high and/or did not cause the same degree of concern as falling foul of terrorism laws.

4.4.4 Finding a Space to Work

Several interviewees stated that their institutions were responsible for difficult physical working conditions, which could have led to negative outcomes. Two interviewees highlighted having to engage with **violent content in inappropriate workspaces** during their PhD studies, including a university library and a PhD common room. These spaces provided no privacy from other students, nor did they afford the interviewees any protection. Dedicated rooms to work in can not only prevent potentially harmful privacy and security

practices, such as working at home – they also ensure a better work-life balance for researchers. This PhD candidate (F17, 20s, UK) reflected on the importance of a dedicated space at her university:

> *I think we have really bad habits in academia where a lot of people work in the evenings and weekends and try and take their work home with them. And I think if I was to sit in my living room looking at these, it would be really difficult to switch off. And, so, I think it's definitely a good system that we have that one room.*

The provision of a dedicated room for online extremism and terrorism research(ers), however, tended to feature only in the accounts of those based at institutions with relatively large teams working on these issues.

4.5 ETHICS BOARDS: GRAPPLING WITH HRECS AND IRBS

> *Over-problematising ethics issues and making it so difficult to get permission to do things – that is really hampering the quest for knowledge.*
>
> **M3, 40s, Europe**

Following on from the previous section, an important aspect of a researcher's relationship with their institution is the formal agreement of an ethical research approach, which is typically overseen by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), known in the US as an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Ethical approval is often required for projects engaging with extremism or terrorism

data, particularly in offline spaces. HRECs and IRBs can, however, regard extremism and terrorism research generally as a 'problem' category, with the work seen as inherently risky. Committees often struggle to assess the dangers of the proposed research. Recognising this, and the threat to the field it constitutes, Morrison, Silke, and Bont's (2021) FRETS framework provides guidance for 'real-world' extremism and terrorism research projects; nevertheless, there is little to guide ethical review boards in the case of *online* extremism and terrorism research. Morrison and colleagues acknowledge this is a gap not covered in FRETS, and Conway (2021) has also drawn attention to the issue. In 2021, Universities UK published useful guidance on security-sensitive research material,[9] but generalised guidance that applies *across* countries is non-existent.

4.5.1 Neglecting Online

A fundamental institutional issue is that online research can fall through gaps in ethical protections. A key finding of REASSURE was that **not all institutions recognise online as a field of study warranting protections for researchers, discussion of research ethics, or formal ethical approval**. As has been well documented elsewhere, university ethics boards evolved from the discussion of medical research with human subjects in physical locations. Online research, which is often passive and therefore does not necessarily entail direct contact with human subjects, frequently escapes ethical approval requirements, especially outside of the European Union, within which GDPR-related concerns around the processing of (sensitive) personal data make this less likely (Maldoff 2018).

Nearly 30% (11) of the interviewees noted that they had conducted empirical online extremism and terrorism research without needing to apply for ethical approval from their institution. This meant that there was no institutional oversight of well-being

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9   See www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/ publications/oversight-security-sensitive-research.

or safety, beyond the supervisor-supervisee/manager-employee role. Of these interviewees, seven worked at universities in the United States, where many institutions stipulate that passive research involving no interaction with human subjects does *not* require ethical approval. **This betrays a belief that only research subjects need protection, not researchers.** One US-based doctoral student who studies far-right social media (F11, 40s) noted that she was not required to seek approval because "there isn't the same type of view that research [of this kind] can produce ethical harm". In this case, the student took the initiative, actively seeking out ethics training, and researching and writing a paper on the topic to gain additional knowledge. Indeed, only 14 (36%) REASSURE interviewees said they had gone through an ethical review process. Furthermore, seven (18%) interviewees told REASSURE their online extremism and terrorism research was "hobby" research; that is, it did not fall under the auspices of their institution's ethical body and was therefore invisible to their institution.

Although some interviewees felt that this lack of ethical review was problematic, as it neglected the researcher, **many believed that the ethical review process could impede research**. This meant that some interviewees did not want ethics boards to engage with their work or take a greater interest in it.

Overall, interviewees saw the impact of HREC/IRB meetings and processes on their research as negative. Three issues, in particular, stood out in this regard. First, six interviewees (15%) said they were sceptical as to board members' knowledge of online extremism and terrorism research and, therefore, their ability to make informed decisions about the ethical issues associated with the research proposed. Such concerns caused a senior North America-based academic (F8, 40s) to make sure she attended ethics boards meetings in order to address head-on any potential questions about the viability of her work. This also gave her the chance to explain her overall position to academic colleagues she feared might otherwise misunderstand the nature of the research. Secondly, and relatedly, a number of interviewees doubted that committee members invested sufficient time in the ethical review process. "My suspicion is that

the number of applications that are now needing to be dealt with in that process is so large that I don't think that individual members of these committees have sufficient time to really understand what is being proposed," said one UK-based professor (M19, 40s). He said committee members' feedback often indicated that reviewers had either not read the proposal or had clearly misunderstood something. Thirdly, some interviewees worried that ethical review could impose restrictions. One researcher at a think tank with no ethical review processes (M7, 30s, Europe) said, "If you institutionalise a process, then it gets a lot less flexible. If I have very rigid structures and then I just am an inch outside of the structures I get the blame, not [the] institution anymore." He viewed ethics review processes as therefore mainly an opportunity for institutions to shift responsibility from themselves to individual researchers, and thus did not see the desirability of such processes.

Additionally, even though existing literature implicitly and explicitly suggests that extremism and terrorism research should not be exceptionalised (Baele et al. 2018; Morrison, Silke, and Bont 2021) – the risks are greater than in some areas of study, but less than in others – REASSURE interviewees felt that **ethics committees misunderstand online extremism and terrorism research**. Interviewees were therefore concerned, as one (F7, 30s, North America) put it, that if HRECs/IRBs "had concerns about my well-being, their response would be like, 'Don't do this work'... I certainly have run stuff by research ethics committees, where I absolutely had the awareness that there were welfare issues, which I precisely didn't raise for completely strategic reasons...". A UK-based professor (F4, 40s) mirrored these comments, saying that it is currently possible for researchers to torpedo their own projects accidentally, if they are too honest with HRECs about the associated risks.

However, one ECR (M15, 30s, UK) observed that the issue was less a misunderstanding than a lack of accumulated knowledge. This was due, he believed, to the often rotating staffing of university ethics boards:

> *People still don't understand the terrorism field.*
> *And you're still kind of answering questions that*
> *seem obvious to us, but not to them. And they kind*
> *of, yeah... It kind of feels like we still haven't built*
> *up that knowledge. You have to explain things,*
> *rather than them knowing that already. And I know*
> *that's the whole process of learning about it, but the*
> *people dealing with ethics change so often [it] doesn't*
> *seem like that knowledge is being retained anywhere.*

A lack of HREC understanding can effectively block research. In the worst cases, interviewees reported that ethics committees obstructed work on online extremism and terrorism because their members did not understand the risks and therefore misperceived and exaggerated them. The professor cited above (F4, 40s, UK) said, "They immediately think this is a sort of crisis situation, whereas we're just doing... fairly standard social science. So, I think we need to educate them about the Internet, what's commonplace, what's ethical." In the cases where research was blocked, researchers suggested that university protocols and ethics boards had effectively **caused them professional harm**. Several interviewees felt that the over-problematisation of the field made it difficult to get permissions.

Six interviewees (15%) reported feeling that **universities and other research institutes were generally risk-averse**. One senior interviewee (F4, 40s, UK) noted that the neo-liberalisation of universities, whereby an audit and market risk-based bureaucracy had become dominant (Thiel 2019; Taylor 2017; Gaffikin and Perry 2009), could lead institutions to take decisions they assessed as less risky. This could hamper research and knowledge, she suggested:

> *My concern [is that] rather than taking the attitude*
> *of 'OK, well, how can we do this?' and 'How we*
> *could do it is by putting protections in place and*

> *supporting people', they'd rather think: 'This is too much hassle. You're putting us at risk. We need to shut this down'.*

A doctoral student (M1, 30s, UK) also suggested that universities regard researcher self-care as of secondary importance to legal liability, saying, "I certainly wouldn't go so far as to say that the university doesn't care about the researchers, I think that they do, but I think it is a quite substantially secondary concern than making sure they're legally covered." Think tank-based researchers reported a similar prioritisation of organisation over people: "The institution protects itself", summed up one think tank-based interviewee (M7, 30s, Europe).

The general lack of confidence in the ability of ethical approval processes to benefit research meant that 12 interviewees (31%) regarded the HREC/IRB as **a box-ticking exercise, or even part of a wider institutional game that had to be played**. A cohort of interviewees felt that HRECs were relatively easy to navigate if they wrote "the right things" in their applications. One senior researcher (M2, 30s, North America), who noted that early in his career he navigated a long-drawn-out ethical process, now believes that "having to justify yourself to an [IRB] is quite easy and everyone can get creative with how they're going to mitigate risk". However, he believed that the field needed to have a much more "real" conversation about self-care. A UK-based doctoral student cited above (M1, 30s), who had completed several ethics forms, outlined the "bog-standard" answers he gave to questions about researcher welfare, in order to get ethics approval. This included, for instance, commitments to speak to supervisors or student well-being services. However, he suggested that this was not honest on his part, because he did not, for example, feel that well-being services were easily accessible, so he was unlikely to try to access them. Similarly, a researcher in North America (F8, 40s) spoke about the strategic way in which she had navigated her IRB. Knowing that "ethics boards can tie you up for a good two to three years ... we focused on [research on]

Twitter, which is considered open-access data", which suggests that they chose the research platform, and indeed the question, with the ethics board in mind.

4.5.2 Well-being and HRECs/IRBs

Where research did require HREC/IRB approval, interviewees felt that risks to researcher well-being and safety were often low priority. The very structure of approval processes – often a form-filling exercise with some back-and-forth email traffic at the start of a project – meant the committee assessment was just a hurdle to be crossed at a particular point in time. On this point, a researcher at a university in North America (M2, 30s) said: "You might get approved for ethics in, you know, October of a particular year for a two – [to] three-year project. And then you never really talk to them about progress… So, you're kind of on your own after." For those who wanted more institutional support, the HREC/IRB process provided a single opportunity to discuss concerns, when in practice **more continued (informed) support was needed**.

The picture was not all negative, however, and there were some examples of **good ethics review practice** proffered. Some interviewees at UK institutions said they had been involved in projects that included researcher self-care strategies as part of their institutions' ethical approval process. One academic (M21, 30s, North America) noted that his team already had some protocols for self-care, saying, "We have group meetings… a 'Slack group' where people can talk about it." However, he said, "The interaction with the [ethics committee] forced us to formalise it a little bit." This suggested that the IRB was, ultimately, helpful in formalising an existing process and increasing team well-being. The interviewee with the most serious threat to life, who held positions at both a university and a think tank (30s), said that the death threat had prompted their employers, if not their university,

to produce a new policy for managing risk. Although they felt like a "guinea pig", they said this was one positive outcome of their ordeal. A professor (M18, 40s) reflected on the ethics process at his UK university, acknowledging that it required him to consider how to safeguard the research team. The HREC focus was on the Prevent Duty as an institutional obligation, however. The Prevent Duty, a mandatory obligation in UK universities, is aimed at preventing radicalisation as part of the national CONTEST strategy, a counter-terrorism initiative (HM Government 2015). This therefore became another example of where safeguarding was aimed first and foremost at institutions, not researchers.

The perception that institutions' priority was the research participant, and not the researcher, was common (12 interviewees, or 31%). Interviewees did of course want participants to be protected, but they also wanted the same care to be shown to them. Most interviewees who had experience of completing ethics applications reported that the process showed little regard for researcher self-care, well-being, or safeguarding. This experience spanned geographical locations and career levels. One ECR (M12, 30s, Europe), reflecting on his time at a UK university, noted that in four ethics applications, and despite lots of questions about data protection, he was never asked about researcher welfare. Two interviewees at different European institutions (F9 and F14) also noted that they were asked no questions about self-care when they sought ethical approval, as did two doctoral students at different UK universities (F15 and F16). They said HREC questions were instead focused entirely on research participants. Similarly, an experienced North America-based university researcher (F5, 50s, North America) stated that she had gone through the IRB process several times, but "no one has ever raised the issue of researcher well-being; not once". Another interviewee (M20, 30s), who had held posts at a number of institutions in North America, put it as follows:

> *IRBs say, 'Make sure that you tell your participants, if they are experiencing trauma during the interviews, that you have resources for them', but never has there been any conversations. of 'Well, if you as the interviewer are experiencing these traumas, make sure you have some resources for yourself'. I've never seen that.*

This was particularly concerning to this interviewee, as he said he involved undergraduate interns in projects researching online extremism and yet he was still not required to conduct an ethical review process. Similar concerns were raised by think tank-based interviewees, albeit generally in relation to management oversight and not formal ethical approval processes; six think tank-based interviewees suggested the latter were generally absent.

4.6 PASS IT ON: TRAINING AND SHARING THE KNOW-HOW

> *I mean, I was pretty aware that you'd come across quite violent, gruesome content. But you don't really find out until you're further into it. Unfortunately, you learn as you go, which is scary.*
>
> **F6, 30s, North America**

> *In grad school, I can honestly say, I don't think the ethical implications of researching it ever came up. I don't think the emotional implications ever came up.*
>
> **F3, 20s, North America**

The preceding sections make it clear that there is little in the way of training or guidance, whether formal or informal, for novice online extremism and terrorism researchers. This section explores what interviewees active in this sub-field feel the right preparation for online research on extremism and terrorism would look like, and who should provide it.

4.6.1 Personality, Resilience and Preparation for the Online Extremism Field

A minority of interviewees (four, or 10%) believed self-protection was not just about experience or measures they themselves took to mitigate harms, but about the **types of people** they were. Some interviewees believed issues of mental health or PTSD could also be addressed by **ensuring that only those with the requisite resilience engaged in the research in the first place**. A senior academic (F8, 40s, North America) suggested that the recruitment process was important for selecting students who could cope:

> *Grad students who work with me had already come off other projects where they had dealt with certain pretty high levels of violence. So, for example, [one] had worked with me on a project where we had interviewed women who'd been victims of horrendous crimes. So, when it came to doing this project, she was already sort of desensitised to a certain level of it. So, you know... and we also went through a process of 'This is the kind of stuff you're going to see; are you going to be okay with that?' And they made the choice individually that, yeah, they didn't have a problem with it. And, so, they self-selected.*

The key takeaway here is the ability to get to know students before employing them, to determine whether or not they are suited to working on extreme content. Clearly, this process is not always an option, for instance when recruiting externally onto PhD programmes. It also relies on good self-awareness and insight on the part of students, and it assumes that resilience is about personality, rather than circumstance, and is somehow 'fixed', and not dynamic. However, workplace resilience is not just about personal traits, such as optimism, but organisational resources (Kwon and Kim 2020).

Interviewees identified personality traits that they believed enabled them to cope better with online extremism and terrorism content. Such observations were gendered, with emotional responses to material understood as potentially harmful, and rational responses believed likely to protect. The senior academic cited above (F8) mentioned that research in this field required a generally "hard" disposition towards the subject matter and an ability to separate oneself cognitively from it. In describing his approach to content, one interviewee compared himself to new and early-career staff who were partially traumatised by disturbing images in online research. He (M13, 30s, UK) said:

> *I guess there's certain personality types which are better suited to working in this sort of thing. Some people are very emotionally invested and connect with the material in a way which is sort of damaging potentially. So, I guess you're looking for people who don't do that. And can sort of walk away and put it back in its box and just sort of divorce yourself from it.*

A doctoral student (F15, 20s, UK) remarked, similarly: "I don't have [a] problem with the work that I do, because part of the way of working on it is making logical sense of the phenomenon that I study. And that goes from whether it's slavery to executions,

anything… coming back to this sort of hard-nosed idea." That is to say, **one personality trait some interviewees felt was conducive to working on online extremism and terrorism was the ability to adopt a scientific approach**. While this is described by some as a personality trait, it is also something that can be taught and learned. Additionally, such an approach prioritises empiricism, and tends to discount positionality, identity, and the inevitability of an emotional response in those whose identity is proximate to the field of study (Conway 2021): women studying incels, for instance.

Some interviewees reported that they had learned coping mechanisms in previous roles. They **came from backgrounds that had prepared them for their online extremism and terrorism research**, such as criminology, the military, or journalism, or they had worked in offline conflict research. This senior academic (F8, 40s, North America) came to terrorism studies from criminology:

> *[The renowned criminologist] Liazos has this famous saying about criminologists, 'We're nuts, sluts and preverts [sic],' right! So, having spent the better part of twenty years dealing, like – doing research in places like Skid Row,*[10] *I expected to see certain things like the violence, the gore and all that… I knew what I was walking into.*

Interviewees viewed being emotionally and mentally prepared as an important foundation of coping. Some reported mental health issues and depression prior to becoming involved in online extremism and terrorism research; they regarded this as a vulnerability, but also as good preparation for their research. This was discussed

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10 An area of Los Angeles infamous for social deprivation, poverty, homelessness, and crime.

in section 4.3.2, where it was noted that such interviewees reported already knowing their boundaries, thanks to previous mental health issues, which they now possessed skills for managing.

4.6.2 Brutal Content: Forewarned is Forearmed

Everyone talking to REASSURE felt it was vital, before beginning the work, to know exactly what online extremism and terrorism research entailed. **Nineteen interviewees (49%) felt that, when starting out, they could have been better informed about the nature of the content** they would be researching and about what harms might ensue. **Largely, researchers had worked out how to cope on their own. This meant that knowledge about how best to do the work was not institutionally or collectively retained.** Although interviewees had been aware that the content would not be pleasant, the actual nature of some material, and its effects, had never been explicitly outlined to them. Without wanting to blame colleagues, one interviewee (M8, 30s, Europe) said he wished there had been more information about the degree of brutality and violence he would have to watch during one particular video-focused research project. There was a lack of forewarning about the nature of the content and, therefore, its possible effects:

> *I didn't know how deep the rabbit hole was. And interestingly, this was not very much talked about before I signed my contract. Would I have liked better supervision? Yes, I would have loved that. That was not part of the project structure when I started. And it still isn't. It should be. I have a place to go if need be, but really, it's still not institutionalised.*

A current graduate student (M17, 20s, UK) made the same point regarding a project he was involved in, saying that he had been left to "fly solo" and just get on with it. Reflecting on the beginning of his career, another interviewee (M2, 30s, North America) noted

that he "would have really benefited from a roadmap early on, from someone who had done this before". Learning from this, he said he now tried to provide such a roadmap for his own graduate students coming through.

4.6.3 Where to Get Help in a Crisis?

As is clear, few in the sub-field reported that their institution had trained them or adequately prepared them for the challenges posed by online extremism and terrorism research. The key concern was well-being, but there were other issues too. **Institutional responsibility for training research teams to identify and deal with risk was also a common theme. This problem was a particularly notable one for staff in supervisory roles, who recognised that it was their job to help, but did not have the necessary institutional supports.** Some nevertheless made individual efforts to improve things. As noted previously, 11 interviewees (28%) explained that, as a result of their own negative experiences, they now actively helped others, whether students in their care, colleagues, or connections made via social media. One interviewee (F1, 30s, UK) described how she had organised a workshop for her team members in which counsellors gave advice on how to recognise PTSD and other trauma, such as changes in behaviour. This in turn helped the organiser to plan for trauma in future projects. The UK-based professor cited in section 4.5.2 on well-being (M18, 40s) reflected on the importance of his positive relationship with his university's Prevent lead, a role mandated in UK law to help identify and prevent radicalisation in universities. The Prevent lead was also the head of student services, and therefore not only had an understanding of the particular issues student terrorism research online entailed, but was in a position to help. For example, he gave a talk to students at the start of their study, and was able to signpost them to well-being services.

Other interviewees were more focused on the provision of formal institutional guidance and resources. A doctoral researcher (M17, 20s, UK) noted that when he first started conducting online

extremism and terrorism research he was given no official policy document to inform his practice. This was a common experience. An experienced researcher of jihadist material (M22, 30s, US) also said he had never seen written guidance or "instructions" for his work, and had been left to fend for himself. People felt such guidance would be useful; indeed, in the REASSURE project the provision of guidance is a motivating factor.

A university professor in the UK (M19, 40s) suggested that institutional guidelines would be particularly helpful for those supervising postgraduates. Given the past lack of discussion of researcher welfare issues, even senior staff could still feel uninformed on the issues or available support, he said. Training for staff who supervise students is important, as they are the staff that junior and less experienced researchers turn to when they need help. In particular, if supervisors are not supported, there is a problem, as **training cascades down**. One PhD researcher (F11, 40s, US) pointed to a positive relationship with her former master's supervisor who was studying similar content, saying that they discussed their work together, and this was important for a sense of camaraderie. Such support is generally formalised within university research systems, yet works best when good relations are actively nurtured. While good support can help prevent depression in postgraduate students (Malik and Makhdoom 2019), a poor supervisory relationship can be "part of the problem" (Cantor 2016). One doctoral student (F16, 20s, UK) observed that she knew she could always speak to her supervisor or colleagues, yet, interestingly, she did not regard this as a form of institutional safeguard, seeing it more as a question of personalities.

4.6.4 A Growing Conversation in the Field

Informal training takes place at events in the academic calendar: **summer schools, conferences, panels, and workshops**. Some researchers had benefited from a growing focus on the harms to researchers caused by studying online extremism and terrorism, from the greater discussion, and from the more formal institutional

engagement with the issue. At least two interviewees (F4 and M18) had organised events, including for doctoral and early-career researchers, in which individuals had the opportunity to discuss a range of topics relating to their work, including self-care issues. Senior colleagues also benefited from sharing experiences. One interviewee (M14, 40s, Europe) wished there were such opportunities to discuss ethical and emotional issues with colleagues at his institution, noting that although it was helpful to discuss matters with other academics at conferences or external events, formalised initiatives within his own institution would be even more beneficial. Three other interviewees agreed. Nonetheless, interviewees believed wider academic events were an important way of fostering the discussion on harms and well-being that this report is contributing to.

REASSURE found that researchers mentor one another informally. Again, as well as providing emotional support and channels for discussing researcher welfare and other matters, several interviewees highlighted practical steps that their colleagues – or one particular trusted colleague – took to help them. In one account, an interviewee (F9, 40s, Europe) published a report that provoked a Twitter storm, generating a high level of aggressive and critical emails from left-wing activists, but also from students at her own institution. Colleagues helped her with drafting responses, so she did not have to do this alone. These experiences represented a type of mentorship, establishing good working practices. A dozen (31%) REASSURE interviewees felt this could, however, be formalised through an official network. As an experienced researcher (M22, 30s, North America) noted, "I think one of the biggest things lacking in this field in general, not just specifically about these issues, is just the lack of mentorship." Eleven interviewees (28%) told us that they had indeed helped other, more junior colleagues or students, but that, based on their own experiences, **people wanted formalised mentor networks and support**.

For some, sources of training and mentorship went beyond other academic researchers. Law enforcement could be helpful in facilitating research. The UK has strict laws on the possession of terrorism content; nevertheless, a senior interviewee (M18, 40s)

at one British university said he was surprised at how supportive and mutually facilitative his relationship with law enforcement had been. This had helped assuage his institution's concerns about terrorism research. However, not all interactions with law enforcement were wanted, or felt necessary. An interviewee in North America (F8, 40s) spoke about receiving guidance from the national intelligence service about ways to stay safe online, such as using software to obscure her IP address. The researcher ultimately decided not to do this, because she felt it would harm her research, and also that she would be at greater risk if she was not identifiable online as an academic. The same researcher later received a call from the national police telling her she could be in danger because of the nature of her work – a warning she rejected, on the basis that terrorism was beyond their remit.

Overall the picture was one of a supportive research community, where people helped one another, but also of individuals working out risks and safeguards on their own. Ten interviewees (26%) wanted written guidance on how to conduct their online research safely, and twelve (31%) said they wanted a more formal mentoring network. These findings highlight the need for (and validate REASSURE's objective of producing) formal guidance to support online extremism and terrorism research(ers), and for the development of more formalised, systematic, cross-institutional and cross-jurisdictional support networks.

5. CONCLUSION

> *Ultimately, it's what I am passionate about and what the team's passionate about.*
>
> **F17, 20s, UK**

> *I felt like I was doing something – was part of something meaningful. And I was part of an ongoing public conversation and public debate that was meaningful. And I had something different to say.*
>
> **M2, 30s, North America**

> *This is not just my experience, but also for my students when we discuss this – that there are these terrible things happening, and although it's tough sometimes for us... we just feel like, 'I'm doing something about it'.*
>
> **F1, 30s, UK**

This REASSURE report systematically documents, for the first time, the experiences and challenges of researching online extremism and terrorism. Findings emergent from our 39 interviews conducted with university – and some think tank-based researchers, ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s, across Europe, North America, and the UK, show the nature and prevalence of harms, the coping mechanisms researchers use to mitigate them, the importance of the informal researcher community's role in providing a place to share and talk, and the lack of institutional support and/or training with regard to these harms and coping mechanisms.

Some of the harms outlined in this report, such as intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and anxiety, are familiar to those who work in the emergency services, journalism, counselling, law enforcement, or online content moderation. Some – such as online trolling and harassment arising from research publications and/or media appearances, the risk of arrest, silencing or other professional harms – are more particular to those working in academia, where anonymity is not an option and career progression can, indeed, depend on a public presence, visibility, and impact.

Online extremism and terrorism research can pose risks to researchers. However, **it is not inherently riskier than some other social science research (e.g., in criminology, sociology, or conflict and security studies broadly) and should not be further stigmatised by already risk-averse institutions**. Online extremism and terrorism research does nonetheless present its own particular risks, and interviewees believed more effort needed to be made to identify and mitigate these. That said, the community of online extremism and terrorism scholars already provides a great deal of support for those active in the sub-field: on social media, within teams in universities and think tanks, and at dedicated conferences and other events.

The REASSURE project was born out of that community and from a gradual collective recognition of the potential risks and harms it faced. It was also born of a recognition of the lack of adequate institutional supports and a desire to develop these further and formalise them. When we reached out to interviewees, experiences of harm were communicated to us, but so too were reports of trauma overcome. We found a huge amount of resilience, expertise, and positivity about the value of the work being done. Dubberley, Griffin, and Bal (2015) note in their study of journalists and humanitarian workers that such positivity is in itself a protection against harm. Positivity also means a commitment to help future generations of scholars in this ever-expanding terrorism studies sub-field, and to share positive stories of what works to deflect harm and increase researcher well-being.

Not all online terrorism and extremism researchers are based in institutions that understand their work. Many researchers are doing difficult work, at a junior level, on ideologies within which hate is explicitly aimed at them (e.g., women researching far-right misogyny or incels, Muslims researching violent jihadists). Much of what was learned was learned through bitter experience and in spite of, not because of, university, research institute or think tank ethics and related policies and processes.

University ethics procedures could be helpful or, interviewees reported, they could represent an obstacle to research, given that online extremism and terrorism research was not well understood and was frequently seen by ethics boards as carrying a highly elevated level of legal and reputational risk (Morrison, Silke, and Bont 2021). So, while some institutions can and do assist researchers and support research effectively, REASSURE emphasises that this support needs to be far more widespread, better informed, and targeted at all career stages. Ultimately, it is an institution's role and responsibility to provide appropriate formalised mechanisms of support in order to recognise, prevent, and/or alleviate harms to their researchers.

It should also be noted that **a significant number of interviewees (12, or almost a third) reported suffering no ill-effects from their online extremism and terrorism research, including no mental health issues and no stress beyond the usual challenges that any job entails**. Clearly, therefore, although there is some risk of harms, it can be mitigated by the creation of supportive professional environments, a heightened awareness of the complexities of the online space, and reflection on the roles of gender, race, religion, and other identity characteristics, including academic seniority, in doing this work. This report should not, therefore, be taken by institutions as a series of cautionary tales and used to block research.

There are questions as well as answers here. At least one interviewee raised the question of long-term cumulative harms to those investigating online extremism and terrorism; these effects are not yet known, although it is worth noting that those with the longest time in the field were less likely to report harms. Issues

of identity also matter in this research area, and further enquiry into the experiences of, among others, junior researchers, women, people of colour, and members of the LGBTQI+ community is warranted.

It is also the case that responsibility for well-being is often pushed by institutions onto individual researchers (sometimes out of sheer ignorance on the part of the institution about the risks and harms faced by their researchers), with the result that some interviewees had instituted their own self-care programmes, often at considerable financial cost to themselves. Budgeting for well-being services is still not written into project proposals as a matter of course. How widespread this becomes will depend on the degree to which researcher welfare is prioritised by both senior staff – who are generally the principal investigators on projects – and institutionally, including not just within universities and tank tanks, but also by funders.

The REASSURE report recognises the resilience and collegiality of the online extremism and terrorism studies community, as reflected by interviewees. Extremism and terrorism researchers respond to the challenges of the online field with humour and helpfulness; they represent a fount of knowledge and resourcefulness on how best to mitigate a variety of harms, and they help one another in doing this. They are motivated by a desire to reduce societal violence and hatred, and a belief in the necessity of their work. REASSURE therefore recommends that this community be actively engaged in any institutional responses to the potential harms extremism and terrorism researchers face, in the spirit of the motto 'nothing about us without us'.

The past few years have demonstrated that online extremism and terrorism, as a field of study, is not likely to disappear any time soon. Many researchers have now worked in this field for decades and have learned through trial and error how to do so safely, ethically, and responsibly. The REASSURE team wants this report to contribute to the ever-expanding field of extremism and terrorism studies by advocating for responsible research in caring environments, with the ultimate aim of reducing both online extremism and terrorism and the harms caused to those working to understand

them. At the most basic level, however, we will be pleased if even one researcher who has experienced harm because of their work in online extremism and terrorism reads this report and realises that they are not alone.

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