Strategies for Researchers Analysing Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content (TVEC)

This infographic brings together the findings of Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), VOX-Pol and Moonshot research examining the relationship between viewing TVEC and researcher wellbeing. These three reports identified strategies for improving researcher wellbeing and reducing harm while viewing TVEC. This is a collection of suggestions of best practices collated from extremism researchers. Researchers tend to employ multiple strategies, but not all strategies will be effective for everyone.
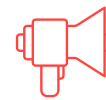
Personal Harm Reduction Strategies

Limit
Only view content that is relevant to your work and avoid viewing content when you are feeling any kind of distress.

Boundaries
Limit exposure to specific work hours, locations, and devices. Avoid viewing content towards the end of the day.

Threats
Notify management within your institution and the relevant law enforcement authorities of threats, especially threats to physical safety.

Exercise
Stay active and spend time away from your desk.

Relax
Take breaks from research to do things you enjoy.

Be Considerate
Ensure your screen is not easily viewable by others.

Selective Attention
Where possible, look away from the most harmful content.

Community Support
Talk to other researchers about their work and its impact.

Transition
Utilise transition rituals that provide space for you to return to normal activities.

Professional Support
Seek professional support to help manage your wellbeing.

Technological Harm Reduction Strategies
Viewing TVEC

Devices
Limit viewing to specific devices. Avoid viewing content on mobile phones and personal devices.

Audio
Remove audio or reduce volume on video content.

Visual
Reduce screen brightness and apply a monochromatic filter on visual content.

Text
Utilise Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software to isolate text from visual content.

Disable
Turn off auto-play and auto-load in settings.

Blur
Use an auto-blur extension to obscure images.

Check your Operational Security (OPSEC)

Social Media
Consider the content of personal social media and remove personal information online. Carefully consider what you post online.

VPNs
Use a Virtual Private Network (VPN), especially if visiting online entities controlled by extremists or terrorists.

Passwords
Frequently change passwords, use a password manager and two-factor authentication (2FA).

'Burner' Tech
Use separate devices for all work content that do not include personal contacts.

Institutional Responsibilities

Research has shown that research institutions are not providing adequate support to researchers studying online terrorist and violent extremist content. GNET, Moonshot and VOX-Pol make the following recommendations for institutions:

- Inform researchers about the potential risks of viewing TVEC. Institutions should provide training, including psychoeducation around effective coping mechanisms, as well as personal digital security. Training is especially important for PhD students and Early Career Researchers.
- Create a caring culture by ensuring adequate supervision and mentoring to staff and creating an environment where they could openly express their needs.
- Provide researchers with appropriate physical space while working with TVEC.
- Provide access to free specialist psychological counselling and mental health services. Institutions should also offer periodic wellbeing checks for researchers.
- Recognise that identity can be a risk factor for harms such as moral injury, or doxing. Ensure appropriate support is available for researchers with marginalised identities, and identities with proximity to the research field.
- Enhance Ethical Review Boards' (ERBs) understanding of online extremism and terrorism research and require risk assessments at the beginning of projects.
- Increase protection towards researchers including access to legal advice
- Ensure adequate supervision and mentoring is available to staff and increase awareness of the risks of TVEC research within the field.
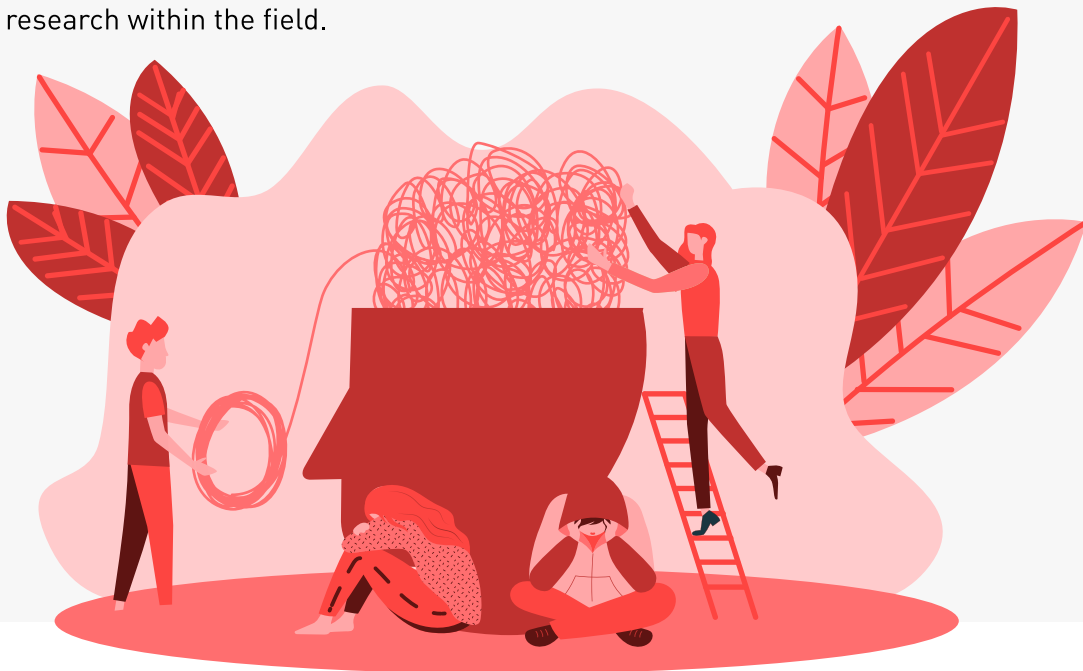
The GNET and VOX-Pol reports can be accessed here:

Lakomy, Miron, and Maciej Bożek. "Understanding the Trauma-Related Effects of Terrorist Propaganda on Researchers." London: Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2023. https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-119.

Pearson, Elizabeth, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, and Maura Conway. "Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers' Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field." VOX-Pol, 2023. https://www.voxpol.eu/download/report/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf.