

Guidelines for researchers working with abusive content

Researcher guidelines provided for the paper, ‘Challenges and frontiers in abusive content detection’ (Vidgen et al. 2019).

The need to research, understand and counter abusive online content is well-established. Researchers who work with such content need to be given sufficient support to ensure that they can complete their roles effectively and do not suffer undue mental health and emotional problems. Vicarious trauma is a real risk in such situations and can cause considerable harm to researchers. For more information, see the report ‘Journalism and vicarious trauma’ by FirstDraft.¹

These guidelines provide researchers with a starting point to help mitigate the harmful impact of repeated exposure to abusive content. They should be adapted for the context in which they are implemented to reflect the goals of the work, the type of content that is reviewed and the available resources.

1. Design and run the project effectively

1. *Provide a sense of purpose*: reinforcing researchers’ purpose and role is important. If a researcher believes their work is delivering real-world impact then the more difficult aspects can be put in their wider context. Make sure that researchers are kept informed of the pro-social goals and outcomes of the research.
2. *Recognize difference*: every researcher will respond uniquely to different types of harmful content. Encourage regular breaks. Encourage researchers to view harmful content at their own pace and to adjust their workload as needed.
3. *Review processes regularly*: share best practices through iteratively reviewing and refining guidelines and processes.

2. Create a supportive and constructive work environment

1. *Provide regular breaks*: abusive content should not be viewed for more than 30 minutes at a time with at least a 15-minute break in between each session.
2. *Ensure peer-to-peer support*: encourage researchers to discuss the work with each other in a safe setting, allowing them to voice concerns and express their views about the challenges and difficulties.
3. *Create external social opportunities*: Depending on the length of the research project, encourage researchers to engage in non-work related social activities, such as group trips. This will allow them to remain motivated. See Peter King (2018), ‘Building resilience for terrorism researchers’ (Vox Pol).²
4. *Provide training to recognize early warning signs*: researchers should be equipped to understand psychological and physiological responses when viewing content which makes them anxious, uncomfortable or unhappy (which can include an increase in heart rate). This can help them to identify when to take breaks and how to manage workloads.
5. *Provide mental health assistance*: provide pastoral support, including regular discussions, personalised safety plans and access to mental health professionals if required. The level of assistance needed will depend upon the researcher, the nature of the content and the length of the project.

¹ <https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/vicarioustrauma.pdf>

² <https://www.voxpol.eu/building-resilience-for-terrorism-researchers/>

3. Implement responsible working practices

1. *Prepare the workflow*: ensure that researchers are not exposed to long chains of abusive content, where possible. If researchers are viewing content on the host platforms then deactivate auto-play and auto-download functions. Researchers should avoid being surprised by extremely abusive content where possible.
2. *Maximize efficiency*: create an effective categorisation and tagging system, with the aim of reducing the amount of times each researcher is exposed to abusive content.
3. *Split and separate harmful content*: if a researcher is reviewing a video, it can help to watch the video first without sound, before than analysing the audio, and then reviewing the video in full (if needed). For text content, consider splitting longer pieces into the constituent paragraphs or sentences.
4. *Minimize screen size*: when viewing harmful videos and images, it can help to minimise the window on your screen to reduce exposure to highly graphic content.