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Catch 22: Institutional ethics and researcher welfare within online extremism and terrorism research

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Joe Whittaker 

Swansea University, UK

Elizabeth Pearson 

Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

Ashley A Mattheis 

Dublin City University, Ireland

Till Baaken

Enhancing the EU's Security Cooperation in and With Asia and the Indo-Pacific (ESIWA+), Germany

Sara Zeiger

Independent Reseracher, USA

Farangiz Atamuradova

Hedayah, United Arab Emirates

Maura Conway

Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract

Drawing from interviews with 39 online extremism and terrorism researchers, this article provides an empirical analysis of these researchers' experiences with institutional ethics processes. Discussed are the harms that these researchers face in the course of their

Corresponding author:

Joe Whittaker, Swansea University, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK.

Email: jj.whittaker@swansea.ac.uk

work, including trolling, doxing, and mental and emotional trauma arising from exposure to terrorist content, which highlight the need for an emphasis on researcher welfare. We find that researcher welfare is a neglected aspect of ethics review processes however, with most interviewees not required to gain ethics approval for their research resulting in very little attention to researcher welfare issues. Interviewees were frustrated with ethics processes, indicating that committees oftentimes lacked the requisite knowledge to make informed ethical decisions. Highlighted by interviewees too was a concern that greater emphasis on researcher welfare could result in blockages to their 'risky' research, creating a 'Catch 22': interviewees would like more emphasis on their (and colleagues') welfare and provision of concomitant supports, but feel that increased oversight would make gaining ethics approval for their research more difficult, or even impossible. We offer suggestions for breaking the impasse, including more interactions between ethics committees and researchers; development of tailored guidelines; and more case studies reflecting on ethics processes.

Keywords

Academic freedom, ethics, extremism, researcher welfare, social media, terrorism

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest in understanding and mitigating risks posed to individuals working in online spaces, including researchers (Allam, 2019), social media content moderators (Pinchevski, 2023), law enforcement (Reeve, 2023) and others (Pearson, 2022). While online harassment is a concern for Internet researchers broadly, it is of particular concern for researchers studying online extremism and terrorism, who may face threats – both virtual and physical – from malign actors as well as potential psychological issues arising from repeated exposure to graphic and/or hateful online content. Recent studies emphasise the need for enhanced protections for these researchers (e.g. see Morrison et al., 2021; Conway, 2021). This concern intersects with relatively long-standing disquiet around university research ethics processes¹ in the social sciences and humanities (Schrag, 2011), particularly 'risky' topics like terrorism (Sluka, 2020). A primary concern is that university ethics committees, which are oftentimes not well versed in the nuances of either online or terrorism research, are making it increasingly difficult to conduct online extremism and terrorism research. This article sits at the intersection of these two problems, drawing insights from the specific experiences of those researching extremism and terrorism online, but that are applicable to the discussion of ethical review for all Internet researchers. Drawing from 39 interviews with those who work in this field, it highlights the dilemma scholars face: they want their institutions to put appropriate protections in place but fear that increased ethical scrutiny will hinder vital research proceeding.

This article is part of the ongoing *Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers' Security, Safety, and Resilience (REASSURE)* project. The project's 2023 report

Findings From the Field highlighted, among other things, the harms experienced by, coping mechanisms developed by and institutional support received (or not) by online extremism and terrorism researchers (Pearson et al., 2023). Here, we build on these findings by describing and discussing the relationship between potential harms to researchers and institutional ethics processes. The article consists of four parts: immediately below is the methodology section, followed by an overview, for context, of the variety of harms that online extremism and terrorism researchers conveyed to us. The next section addresses our interviewees' experiences with ethics committees, divided into three sub-sections: their general experiences with ethics committees in the course of conducting their research, the role of researcher welfare within ethical review processes and researchers' concern that greater emphasis on their welfare will cause risk-averse institutions to stifle online extremism and terrorism research. This is followed by a discussion of ways in which this impasse can be broken, including education of ethics committees by researchers, development of a dedicated online extremism and terrorism ethics framework, and scholars publishing more reflective and prescriptive work within this space.

Methodology

Research design and schedule

Data were collected as part of a wider project which sought to understand the experiences of online extremism and terrorism researchers (Pearson et al., 2023), including the harms they face, the coping mechanisms they deploy to deal with them, and institutional supports. Interviewees were first asked a series of demographic and professional questions, which were followed by a set of 'core questions':

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

The interviews were transcribed by the interviewer onto separate Word documents and then anonymised prior to sharing with the wider group of researchers. As there were several members of the team from several different institutions (each with access to different types of software), we opted to use password-protected Word and Excel documents to code and access the data.

The data were coded qualitatively into themes which represented participants' experiences (e.g. 'threats to physical safety' 'withdrawal from friends'). From this original

round of coding, we found that almost every participant had an experience (or a notable lack thereof) with their institutional ethics committee which they wished to discuss. The research question for this article – how did participants experience their institutional ethics processes? – was therefore developed post hoc and iteratively after the initial round of coding.

The coding schema for this part of the research was inductive, as opposed to the deductive approach adopted in the original report. We began by going through the interview data line-by-line, searching for emergent themes (e.g. an individual reporting that they had a multi-year delay with an ethics application). This was followed by thematically coding these nodes into larger categories (using the same example, this was coded into a category titled ‘ethics blockage’). These themes were then grouped into three larger categories for purposes of this article: (1) experiences with ethics committee, (2) researcher welfare within ethics processes and (3) institutions hampering research.

Interviewee selection and demographics

We opted for a snowballing approach to interviewee recruitment, gathering an initial list of active members of our research community and after each individual interview asking for the names of other researchers that may have insight into the topic. To be included, participants had to have studied online extremism or terrorism to PhD level *and/or* be working on online extremism and terrorism at a Western university or other research institution. We focused on researchers working in Western institutions in recognition of the often distinct and complex situations that researchers within the Global South face. Focusing on Western-based researchers only is a limitation of this work, and we hope that future REASSURE research will involve more focused study with partners in the Global South. Before any attempt to sample the research population, this project was approved by Swansea University’s School of Law Ethics Committee.

Of our 39 interviewees, 26 were based solely at a university, 6 at both a think tank *and* a university, 2 Europe-based interviewees worked in government-funded institutions, 2 worked in private institutions and 3 were employed solely at think tanks at the time of interview. There was close to an even split between males ($n=22$ or 56%) and females ($n=17$ or 44%). Interviewees identified mostly as white ($n=29$) or white Jewish ($n=3$), while seven participants identified as a person of colour, which included three Muslim individuals. Nobody self-identified as LGBTQI+ or revealed their sexuality as a factor when asked if any identity characteristic(s) had affected their experience of harm. Interviewees were based in 9 countries² and represented 13 nationalities.³ With respect to career stage, 13 (33%) were senior, having been working with permanent contracts for 8 years or more. Twenty-six (66%) were considered junior: those completing a PhD programme, or in temporary contracts, or early-career researchers within 8 years of completing their postgraduate research, or those having equivalent professional experience.

In terms of the ideologies that our interviewees studied, 23 people were studying the far-right; 29 people were researching online jihadism. Fourteen interviewees had experience of studying both. Five people also studied incels, either exclusively or alongside far-right/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.

Interviewees are identified herein by their gender and a number. When relevant, we also include the age group, location (grouped into North America; the United Kingdom;⁴ Europe) and/or career stage of interviewees.

Harms experienced

Before moving to interviewees' experiences with ethics processes, outlined are a range of harms reported by our interviewees.⁵ What follows is a summary of three categories of harm:

- External (i.e. caused by a third party in either online or offline spaces or both);
- Internal (i.e. psychological or emotional issues that individual researchers develop over time);
- Professional (i.e. caused by one or both of the two types of harms, often creating negative impacts on career progression).

This is followed by a short section outlining the ways in which harms tend not to be equally spread among researchers, emphasising that identity and career stage can play important roles. Worth underlining here too is that around one third of our interviewees *did not* experience any harm beyond the expectations of a normal job. While this means that two thirds of interviewees were harmed by their research in some way, the nature of these harms varied greatly (e.g. from death threats to 'hassles' with ethics committees) within our sample.

External harms

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) *Ethical Guidelines 3.0* (2019) note that researching extremist groups' use of the Internet poses direct threats to researchers, including potential death threats and doxing (i.e. online publication of private personal information, for example, home address). Similarly, Marwick et al. (2016) discuss a range of harms that those undertaking 'risky' online research may face, including doxing, 'brigading' (i.e. when a group work together to harass) and 'swatting' (i.e. reporting a false threat to local police to prompt an emergency response). Our interviewees reported a range of external harms arising from their research activity. Nine (23%) reported receiving death threats, with some deemed credible enough to involve law enforcement. Some of these threats were parts of campaigns of targeted online harassment, many of which involved 'trolling' (i.e. when an individual or group intentionally seeks to upset another individual or group online) and/or 'doxing'.

Internal harms

Several interviewees, particularly those who had studied jihadist materials that contained extreme violence, spoke about the mental and emotional toll that this had taken

on them. This included relaying symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, such as hallucinations and intrusive thoughts. Others spoke about changes to their mood, such as being in depressed and tearful states, as well as being anxious and fearful. In addition, numerous interviewees reported gradually becoming desensitised to the content they were exposed to, as well as experiencing emotional numbness. One problem that several researchers highlighted was an erosion of work–life boundaries, such as watching execution videos while undertaking everyday chores and/or late into the night. Upon experiencing these harms, participants said that they felt isolated and were unwilling to discuss their problems. Our findings are complemented by survey-based research ($n=95$) conducted by Lakomy and Bozek (2023), who find that most terrorism researchers experience mental harms and that watching propaganda can trigger sadness, irritation, anger and fear, and that these researchers have typically not been supported by their institution. Morrison et al. (2021) also acknowledge the risk that online terrorism researchers face, noting that many have added substantial knowledge to the field at the cost of personal trauma from repeated exposure to violent content.

Professional harms

External and internal harms can each cause an individual to be less able or willing to perform their job, creating a professional harm. Several interviewees who were subject to harassment or doxing felt intimidated and removed themselves from the public space in fear of the experience being repeated. This is problematic because most professional researchers, particularly in academia, face career disadvantage if they do not publicise their work for a wider audience (Mattheis and Kingdon, 2021). This is particularly pertinent within the United Kingdom, where ‘impact’ – which relies on ideas being communicated outside of the academy – has become a key foundation of career progression. Researchers were also concerned with state actors’ counter-terrorism laws damaging their careers, or worse, being imprisoned. Again, the United Kingdom was highlighted because of its wide-ranging laws. While no participant in our sample had been arrested for engaging with terrorist content, some spoke with unease about having to potentially defend themselves. This is an understandable concern given that relevant UK laws have been criticised as overly broad and ‘extend[ing] the temporal reach of the criminal law’ (Macdonald, 2015: 64).

Unequal harms

One finding that spread across all three themes is that harms are not spread equally. White (2022) has argued that women and members of minorities may face additional risks from extremists, such as threats, trolling and sexual harassment. Several of our interviewees concurred, noting that identity plays an important role when researching extremist and terrorist content. They also pointed to the emotional toll of, for example, people of colour engaging with deeply racist content; Muslim researchers dealing with their faith when analysing jihadist content, as well as being attacked for it by members of the far-right; or female researchers immersed in extreme misogynist online spaces.

As Schulz et al. (2023: 1465) put it, ‘the closer (emotionally and personally) one is to one’s research topic or participants, the higher this emotional and psychological impact of conducting research may be’. There are some limitations in our sample here though – none of our participants disclosed that they identified as LGBTQI+, possibly due to there not being anyone in the sample, or possibly because they did not feel it was relevant to the harms that they faced. Understanding this is important given the prominence anti-LGBTQI+ narratives within far-right discourse in recent years.

Interviewees also noted that less experienced researchers often bore the brunt of harms, faced with the task of trying to ‘break through’ into a competitive academic job market while not causing too much of a fuss for their teammates or supervisors, which often led to them attempting to deal with issues on their own. Similarly, several interviewees (junior and senior) said that they wished they were aware of the risks before beginning their research and not knowing made them feel like they had gone in blind. Lakomy and Bozek’s (2023) survey found similarly that junior researchers were less likely to be aware of the risks involved in engaging with problematic content and, as a result, less careful about the ways that they approached their research.

Catch 22: balancing researcher welfare with institutions’ ethical processes

Given the nature of the harms discussed above, one might assume institutions were cognisant of these issues and therefore build them into ethics processes prior to research commencing, as suggested by AoIR’s *Ethical Guidelines 3.0* (2019) and the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research* (2021). This section outlines the experiences of our interviewees of attempting to navigate these harms in the context of institutional ethics processes. It consists of three sections:

1. Experiences with ethics processes;
2. Researcher welfare within the ethics process;
3. Institutions hampering research.

Interviewees painted a complex picture. Many online extremism and terrorism researchers we interviewed were not required to complete institutional ethics applications. For interviewees that *did* undertake applications, researcher welfare was not a topic raised, which was viewed positively by some interviewees concerned about potential restrictions likely to flow from deeper enquiry by ethics committees into this issue. However, considering the harms outlined above, most interviewees were keen for greater institutional support for themselves and their colleagues (particularly junior ones), and, as such, the importance of thorough ethical review processes. To complicate matters, there was a general feeling that institutions, which were viewed as risk averse due to concerns around litigation and/or reputational damage, could use welfare concerns as an opportunity to stifle ‘risky’ research. This left interviewees feeling they were in a ‘Catch 22’ in which they can either have greater institutional protection and oversight, but face greater restrictions on research, or be left to their own devices, but with little to no protection.

Experiences with ethics processes

Given the range of harms potentially encountered, one might expect that most projects involving collection and/or analysis of online extremism or terrorism data would require ethical approval, particularly as it is considered inherently 'risky' by many institutions (Sluka, 2020). However, our interviewees reported that ethical review processes often neglect online research. Eleven interviewees (28%) reported that they had undertaken empirical research on this topic without needing to apply for ethical approval, while seven (18%) said that their online activity was 'hobby research' – which is to say, not formal research but ad hoc content collection, review and/or analysis undertaken to keep up to speed with trends in online extremism and terrorism – and therefore also did not require approval and was thus invisible to their institutions. Only 14 participants (36%) said they had gone through ethics review for their projects. This means that for most participants, there was no oversight of well-being and safety for either participants or researchers. The neglecting of online research is, in large part, due to university ethics committees' roots in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Morrison et al., 2021), particularly medical research ethics, which centres the protection of research participants (Conway, 2021).

Given that many parts of online research are observational – such as watching violent videos, scraping data from social media or lurking on an online forum – there may be a view that a lack of direct contact with physically embodied human subjects equals a lack of need for ethical oversight. This is particularly the case in the United States, where 7 of the 11 individuals who did not undertake ethical review were based. One North American-based doctoral student noted,

All I can do is laugh. The ethics approval processes that I have gone through . . . [can't] wrap their head around what it means to do research online yet . . . They said, this is not human-subject research. And that was that . . . There was no further review. (M6, 30s)

Another North America-based PhD student noted they did not seek ethical approval because 'there isn't the same type of view that research [of this kind] can produce ethical harm' (F11, 40s). Mattheis and Kingdon (2021) reflect on this point, noting that in the US context, the framework around ethics was designed for offline research and is primarily focused on protecting participants. They argue that online research, particularly combined with the study of terrorism, confounds these frameworks. There may be good reason to doubt the prevailing US orthodoxy that data collected from social media should not require ethical approval, however. Fiesler and Proferes (2018) conducted a survey of Twitter users, which found that most believed that consent should be sought to use tweets in research, but also that the specific context, such as level of online anonymity, dataset size and types of data collected, were also important. Fiesler et al. (2016) suggest that the nature of social media data has complicated the basic ethical rules to 'do no harm' and that ethics review boards are struggling to devise appropriate norms.

When interviewees did complete ethics applications, they tended to describe the process as difficult and unhelpful. One European-based researcher noted, 'it's a very tedious process . . . I don't think that the review committee was particularly aware of this space

and its violent potential' (F14, 30). A UK-based doctoral student told of how the ethics committee he encountered required him to meet with another academic outside of the field who also researched a potentially distressing topic:

It was not very useful . . . They had no real idea as to what our field was, or what sort of things we might be likely to see. And then they just spoke about their own field . . . [We] got the impression that . . . it was a box ticking exercise . . . They wanted to say that they had us speak to someone. (M1, 30s)

A senior researcher in North America said that ethics applications can be a considerable time commitment and wrap individuals up in bureaucracy for extended periods of time: 'I know from experience of [researchers from my country] that our ethics boards can tie you up for a good two or three years' (F8, 40s). The ethics process being difficult to navigate is well-covered terrain among terrorism researchers. Morrison et al. (2021: 272) note that many scholars consider the process to be 'dreadful' and there are many 'horror stories of interference and unconstructive recommendations'. Glasius et al. (2017) observe a general feeling among academics to consider ethical review as a bureaucratic nuisance which often has varied levels of appropriateness and comprehensiveness. Dawson and Amarasingam (2016) reflect on their experience obtaining ethical approval for a project interviewing foreign fighters and their families. Because the project was high risk, it involved ethical approval from each scholar's academic institution. This included a 'full board' of 22 individuals from a range of backgrounds. Convening ethics committees of this size creates problems because it maximises the chances that misunderstandings will arise and, in Dawson and Amarasingam's case, inflated the 'shopping list' of demands that the committee made.

Whether interviewees had to engage in ethics review processes or not, there was a widespread feeling that committee members were incompetent. One North America-based researcher said,

They're pains in the ass . . . You get these folks on the board that are trying to assess studies in the social sciences, but they're like biologists or chemists who don't really have much of an understanding of how to do social science projects . . . [and] their job is to block you. (M20, 30s)

One opined that the reason for blockages from ethics committees was that

these people self-select, like to feel important and want to make pronouncements . . . and criticise a particular methodology that they don't understand and were ready to reject something because of that. I'm like, quite frankly, that method is none of your business. (F8, 40s, North America)

We would challenge the idea that methodology is not a concern of an ethics committee. For example, the work of Jackson Wood (2024) and Julia Ebner (2019) relied on covert methods, which clearly require scrutiny. However, the charge of incompetence has been made repeatedly by terrorism scholars (Morrison et al., 2021; Vaughan, 2025).

Sluka (2020) argues that committees are not well informed and do not make independent decisions, but rather are swayed by media-generated stereotypes and misconceptions. This point is also made with regard to the wider social sciences by Schrag (2011), who argues that ethics committees are not representative of the disciplines that they govern and oversee such a wide range of research that they lack the necessary expertise to make competent decisions, highlighting Internet research as particularly problematic in this regard.

As well as being unqualified, one senior academic we interviewed highlighted that ‘the number of applications that are now so large that I don’t think that individual members of committees have sufficient time to really understand what is being proposed’. This can lead to feedback which indicates that the committee has either not read the proposal or have misunderstood it (M19, 40s, United Kingdom). In most institutions, an ethics committee role is a largely unrewarded administrative burden and is therefore unlikely to be prioritised compared to other commitments, such as teaching or research.

Interviewees felt, furthermore, that ethical review processes were not productive ways to think critically about ethical issues. One early-career researcher reflected that

I don’t view it as something that helped me research. I don’t view it as an opportunity that I wouldn’t otherwise take to be reflective about the ethics of research. I think much more about [that] on my own than I do when filling out an [ethics application]. (M6, 30s, North America)

Another academic lamented the lack of ‘real conversation[s]’ about ethics, and instead noted that the process was navigated easily with experience: ‘I think having to justify yourself to an ethics board is quite easy and everyone can get creative . . . but it’s very removed and very abstract’ (M20, 30s, North America). One senior participant said they constructed their research design to have as little interference as possible from the ethics committee, noting they made ‘sure that my [committee] would not have a problem with it . . . We forced them into a situation where they had a meeting and agreed, yes, you’re correct’ (F8, 40s, North America).

Researcher welfare within ethics processes

The fundamental job of ethics committees is to minimise or alleviate harms that may be incurred as a result of research, leading to the oft-cited, if somewhat simplistic and subjective, ethical maxim ‘do no harm’ (Buchanan and Warwick, 2021; Favaretto et al., 2020; Hugman et al., 2011). However, the recipient of the harm that should be avoided is not always clear. Of the 14 online extremism and terrorism researchers we interviewed who had experience of ethics processes, 7 (50%) noted that there were no questions pertaining to researcher welfare. This was most starkly exemplified by a North America-based researcher with 16 years’ experience, who noted that: ‘No one has ever raised the issue of researcher wellbeing; not once’ (F14, 50s). Many interviewees wished for greater emphasis on it. One early-career researcher in the United States thought ‘that [researcher welfare] would be something that [ethics committees] should be showing more of an interest in’ (M20, 30s). This view was reflected by several participants; 12 (31%) interviewees said that they perceived their institutions’ ethical priorities to be with research

participants instead of them as researchers. Conway (2021) argues that researcher safety is all-but-missing from discussions around the ethics of online extremism and terrorism research, with Morrison et al.'s (2021) article in the same journal special issue concurring. The latter, highlighting the potentially harmful online content that researchers analyse, make the case that it is vital that ethics committees have necessary systems in place to ensure the well-being of research teams.

Among our interviewees, early-career researchers often found themselves more exposed to potential harms than more senior colleagues. One European-based researcher reflected on their master's dissertation, conducted at a British university at the height of so-called Islamic State online activity, which included looking at propaganda videos:

I didn't have [an ethics review process] . . . My supervisor opened up a sharing folder . . . between him and me to make sure that I don't have this stuff on my computer [in case the police ask questions] . . . Apart from that, there was no safety net, there was no supervision, there was no 'if you have problems looking at it, you can go there'. It was just: 'get to it and good luck with it', basically. (M7, 20s)

A UK-based doctoral student also reflected on her experience of analysing jihadist primary source data, noting that in previous roles in North America and a non-Western country, there was no ethical review process, making the United Kingdom the first place she had undertaken it. However, there were no questions in the ethics application that related to researcher welfare (F20, 30s). Given that both our study and that of Lakomy and Bozek (2023) find that early-career online extremism and terrorism researchers have more opportunities to experience harm than their senior colleagues, there should be considerable concern around the lack of necessary reflection on post-graduate student welfare, especially given doctoral students may already feel more isolated and experience more mental health challenges than other highly educated individuals (Evans et al., 2018; González-Betancor and Dorta-González, 2020; van der Heijde, 2019).

A small number of interviewees that were required to address researcher welfare as part of ethics review processes said they essentially gamed the system and, by extension, were not fully honest in their submissions. One UK-based doctoral student noted,

It becomes relatively bog standard once you've done more than one of these . . . You say that you've: a) Got a community of people that research the same thing, b) You've got supervisors who you can turn to, and c) you know where student wellbeing is if needs be. I've never gone to student wellbeing. From what I understand it's not actually something that you could access quickly if you need it, which I think is an important point, and perhaps not the most honest thing for me to put on an ethical review form. (M1, 30s)

A North America-based researcher made a similar point: 'You can get creative when you answer the [researcher welfare] questions for an ethics board. But that doesn't necessarily mean that what you say you're going to do is actually what is going to happen when . . . issues arise' (M20, 30s). These reflections demonstrate a view that being truly honest about the realities of the potential harms arising, or what will be required to mitigate them, may encumber ethics applications and is thus to be avoided.

Important to point out here too is that some interviewees reported positive experiences around researcher welfare with ethics committees. One researcher noted they had several existing protocols within their team, such as taking breaks, not spending too much time in front of distressing content, group meetings and mentorship from senior teammates. They said that although they already had these systems in place prior, ‘the interaction with the [ethics committee] basically forced us to formalise it a little bit’ (M21, 30s, North America). A senior academic acknowledged that the ethics process at his UK university made him think about effective ways of safeguarding his research team (M18, 40s). An individual who worked at both a think tank and a university, who faced credible death threats, noted that the experience caused his employer to produce a new policy for management of welfare and risk. Although the individual said that they felt like a guinea pig, they took this as a positive outcome from their experience (M9, 30s, United Kingdom).

Institutions hampering research

Although many of the harms that online extremism and terrorism researchers may face are stark, some of our interviewees were undoubtedly glad of the ‘hands off’ ethical approach taken by their institutions. Notable here is that all of these interviewees were cognisant of the welfare issues arising but, crucially, were wary that formalising researcher welfare as a component of ethics review processes would make it more difficult to do what they viewed as crucial empirical research.

Interviewees generally believed, as already mentioned, that their own welfare was secondary to participants in the eyes of their employers. They also believed that they were lower in the pecking order than both their institutions’ reputations and legal compliance. One doctoral student noted that

It seems that the ethics review board is far more concerned with what the university can be liable for rather than researcher self-care . . . I certainly wouldn’t go as far as to say that [my employer] doesn’t care about researchers – I think they do – but I think it’s quite substantially a secondary concern than making sure they’re legally covered. (M1, 30s, United Kingdom)

A senior researcher from North America said that ethical review was ‘mostly about protecting the university and protecting the institution not necessarily providing solutions to researchers about how to navigate issues of risk’ (M2, 30s). This segues with Dawson and Amarasingam’s (2016) view that ethics committees tend to display a marked preoccupation with the legal liabilities of their institutions, which Vaughan (2025) puts down to the neoliberal nature of contemporary universities. Sluka (2020) goes even further, lamenting the intrusion of ‘risk management’ into academic institutions, which is clothed in the language of ethics but has the purpose of restricting academic freedom and thereby ensuring valuable research will not be conducted.

Institutional reputation has become a growing – yet controversial – part of ethics processes. In their *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research*, the British Psychological Society notes that an:

Important consideration is researcher, and/or their linked institution, reputation: the ubiquity of, and enhanced scope for dissemination and visibility of findings in IMR [Internet-mediated Research] can make researchers/institutions increasingly vulnerable to scrutiny, potentially leading to derogatory attacks that might damage reputations. (British Psychological Society, 2021: 20)

In interview-based research conducted by Guillemin et al. (2021), with both members of ethics committees ($n=34$) and researchers ($n=54$), some respondents suggested that their experiences with ethics processes demonstrated that heightened concerns around legal and reputational risk were becoming common. They argue strongly against this as it may prevent important research being conducted and infringe upon academic freedom. In a survey of educational researchers ($n=55$) conducted by Brown et al. (2020), when questioned why they perceived ethics committees exist, the top two 'strongly agree' answers were protecting the reputation of the institution (58%) and to protect it from litigation (51%). This was above answers such as: to strengthen the rigour of research (46%); to encourage a shared set of values (44%); to support the development of effective research (38%); and to provide useful feedback (36%). Online extremism and terrorism research is certainly not the only 'risky' research currently being conducted in university settings and online extremism and terrorism researchers are not the only ones to have lamented the rising importance of institutional reputation as a concern. Focusing on research into gender-based violence, Schulz et al. (2023) argue that ethical review procedures are designed first and foremost to avoid institutional liability rather than to practice a duty of care towards researchers. Jones and Sagar (2022: 25–26), whose research explored student involvement in the sex industry, noted: 'Regrettably, it must be said that our ethics committee seemed more concerned with reputational risk to the university rather than risks to participants and researchers'. Reflecting on her PhD on the topic of sex work, Hemming (2009) argues that although committees used language such as 'duty of care', she understood their real concern to be with the university's reputation.

These overlapping concerns around legal liability and reputational damage will, our interviewees believed, lead to institutions becoming increasingly risk-averse, making it more difficult to conduct their research. One senior academic believed that this had already happened, noting that 15 years ago there was little ethical oversight, but now 'it's gone in the complete opposite direction where it's become really hard to do any kind of research because the concern is so high and the willingness to take risks is so low' (M19, 40s, United Kingdom). Another senior academic expressed a fear that universities:

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'. (F4, 40s, United Kingdom)

A North America-based interviewee felt similarly: 'My understanding is that if [the ethics committee] had concerns about my well-being, their response would be like, don't do this work' (F7, 30s). As a result, this interviewee did not raise welfare issues that they knew would be prescient for 'strategic reasons'. A senior academic based in Europe also reflected concerns about institutional risk creeping into ethics processes:

There's a trend towards over-problematizing ethics issues and making it so difficult to get permission to do things that [it] is really hampering the quest for knowledge . . . [In some places] it's the fear of risk, the fear of litigation, that sort of thing, just imposes really excessive bureaucracy on scholars. (M3, 40s, Europe)

In the context of external threats, Marwick et al. (2016) argue that saying 'stay off the Internet' is not an appropriate institutional response to researchers in this field, suggesting it is analogous to telling a student being stalked not to go outside. Mattheis and Kingdon (2021) make this point too, arguing that it is inappropriate to suggest that researchers that are facing welfare issues change topics or avoid public exposure, but instead institutions should provide appropriate support and training to offset potential harms.

Given the feeling that institutions are risk averse, many interviewees found it difficult to parse their need for researcher welfare to be included in the ethics process while not torpedoing their chances of doing worthwhile research. One senior academic noted,

Say you're starting off a large project and you raise this matter or even in an [ethics application] . . . Potentially you've just kiboshed your own project. It's sort of a delicate issue. So, for us, we have conscientiously [been] in conversation with PhD students [about welfare issues] and not raised it [to the institution]. And it hasn't been raised back to us. (F4, 40s, United Kingdom)

In essence, this researcher took a tactical decision to deal with welfare issues informally themselves and not risk raising them institutionally. It is perhaps unsurprising then that a think tank researcher relayed that he was glad that his institution did not operate within a restrictive university environment, noting that ethics processes make everything more complicated and difficult: 'If you institutionalise a process, then it gets more complicated . . . I don't like having too many rules or guidelines because that's just kind of limiting. And then, obviously, the institution protects itself' (M7, 30s, Europe).

Breaking the impasse

The foregoing demonstrates the bind that online extremism and terrorism researchers find themselves in. They are, in large part, in favour of more ethical scrutiny, including when it comes to researcher welfare, but are simultaneously concerned that scrutiny will make institutions – that are increasingly risk averse and concerned with their reputations – put up further barriers to research. In this sense, our interviewees expressed a 'Catch 22': a problematic situation for which the only solution is denied by a circumstance inherent in the problem (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, nd). Interviewees wanted institutional support to conduct their research, but that formalisation may make the research impossible. Although this perspective is understandable, one need not fall into a false dichotomy where the only two options are (1) little-to-no ethical oversight and extensive harmful risks to researchers or (2) heavy oversight and greater institutional protection but with a lot of research denied ethical approval. There are other options which may help the situation moving forwards.

Given the nature of many complaints about ethics review processes – both among our interviewees and in the wider literature – relate to committees' competence, there is a clear need for greater dialogue between researchers in this field and ethics committees. Part of the problem is that the ethics process is seen as adversarial by many, rather than a helpful resource to engage with throughout the research lifecycle (Guillemin et al., 2021). This is in large part because ethics committees are reluctant to respect the professional knowledge, training and experience of even the most seasoned researchers (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2016). To move towards greater competence among committees, there should be ongoing dialogue between members and researchers. Morrison et al. (2021: 275) advise that to facilitate this, terrorism researchers should be invited to present their research to committees, including their previous work which has gone through ethical review. They argue that 'this can assist in the eradication of any inherent biases and pre-conceived ideas about what terrorism research entails'. Similarly, Glasius et al. (2017) push back against many academics' distrust of ethical review, stating that engaged ethics procedures, in particular with an element of human interaction, can be a useful way of engaging with important ethical issues without it turning into a box-ticking exercise. This would clearly require something of an upheaval of the ways in which most institutions conduct their ethics processes. At most universities, being a member of an ethics committee is an administrative job which makes up a relatively small part of a scholar's contract. If there is an expectation for committee members to have extensive knowledge of several sub-fields and spend more time engaging with colleagues, then institutions must make sure that there is sufficient time allocated in their already heavy workloads to do so.

The creation of frameworks that focus on online extremism and terrorism research ethics, including researcher welfare, could be valuable too, both to help to educate ethics committees and for those preparing ethics applications. A number of tailored ethical frameworks have been devised in recent years. For example, Morrison et al.'s (2021) *Framework for Research Ethics in Terrorism Studies* (FRETS) offers a series of Yes/No questions for committee chairs and reviewers to answer when assessing an ethics application, which includes a section on researchers' rights, safety and vulnerability. FRETS is primarily focused on face-to-face research however, with the authors recognising that online research raises unique challenges thus establishing the need for an even more specialised framework. Baele et al. (2018) developed a framework for security research which highlights the risks faced by online researchers, calling on institutions to provide greater guidance and support to their employees. As discussed above, some learned societies have also developed specific guidance for Internet-mediated research, such as Association of Internet Researchers (2019) and the British Psychological Society (2021). Both of these discuss researcher welfare, and the former even explicitly mentions extremism. These frameworks are a positive start to educate ethics committees. However, there is still space, as Morrison et al. (2021) suggest, for a framework that focuses specifically on online terrorism and extremism research, that would ideally include guidance for ethics committees around researcher welfare.

As well as formal frameworks, researchers can share experiences of ethics processes to help educate each other. Conway (2021) notes that although inter-colleague discussions around welfare are important, it is time for researchers to go further, committing ethical decisions to paper so a store of knowledge can be built up over time. As with

ethics frameworks, precisely this approach has been growing in recent years. This includes empirical research which seeks to document and collate experiences from scholars with experience navigating ethics review processes, such as recent research by Vaughan (2025) or this article. It can also take the form of post hoc reflections on research projects, which include discussions of ethical and welfare issues; for example, work by Dawson and Amarasingam (2016), Winter (2019) and Whittaker (2019). Similarly, publishing examples of good practice can help to build up the store of knowledge. Lakomy (2023) offers a host of digital hygiene practices for researchers, while White (2022) and Marwick et al. (2016) both offer a set of good practices and safety measures. These types of ‘How To’ publications can be valuable resources for researchers who are designing research projects and drafting accompanying ethics applications. It is likely that if the applicant is being proactive in offering mitigation strategies, an ethics committee will look more favourably on a project and be willing to co-operate, even if they feel unease about risks.

Conclusion

This article has explored the experiences of 39 online extremism and terrorism researchers to better understand if and how they have navigated issues of researcher welfare within their institutional ethics processes. While each interviewee had their own stories and there were plenty of diverging opinions, there was a general feeling that improved institutional protections are warranted in this sub-field, and ethical review processes are one avenue for researchers to reflect on these. However, interviewees also expressed a concern that, in practice, their institutions are more concerned with their own legal and reputational issues than researcher welfare and could react by putting up further barriers to research. In essence, it is a Catch 22: participants want support and protections to conduct their research, but that support may make the research impossible. If there is one core message to take away from this article, it is that the solution to this problem must be finessed. There is often a tendency to react to a problem by overcorrecting with the solution. If recent research outlining the potential harms posed to researchers in this field has this result, then we may find that Interviewees’ concerns were well-founded. However, if the solutions focus on measured discussions with institutions, education of and opportunities for negotiation with ethics committees, and further publication of relevant experiences and decisions, then it may be possible to arrive at a desirable conclusion, which allows for unincumbered research while also providing appropriate welfare supports for researchers.

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ORCID iDs

Joe Whittaker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7342-6369>

Elizabeth Pearson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0918-6107>

Ashley Mattheis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2919-0712>

Notes

1. These processes are generally overseen by what are often referred to as Institutional Review Boards (IRB) in the United States and (Human) Research Ethics Committees (HREC) in Europe. Here, we use the phrase ‘Ethics Committee’ to encapsulate both of these, accepting that there are some differences between countries and institutions.
2. Austria, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.
3. In addition to the countries above, interviewees had nationalities from the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia.
4. This includes a single researcher based in the Republic of Ireland. This researcher was agreeable to being grouped with their British counterparts because of the similarities between the two academic systems. We believe that ‘UK & Ireland’ would have been misleading given the high number of UK-based researcher (16 vs 1 in Ireland).
5. These harms are addressed in detail in the original report (Pearson et al., 2023).

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Author biographies

Joe Whittaker is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Sociology, and Social Policy at Swansea University. He is also a member of the Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC) at Swansea University.

Elizabeth Pearson is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Royal Holloway, University of London and Programme Lead for the MSc Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies course.

Dr Ashley A Mattheis is a Lecturer in Digital Media and Culture at the University of Manchester in the UK.

Till Baaken is Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism at the Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia and the Indo-Pacific project (ESIWA+) in Germany.

Sara Zeiger is an independent researcher in the USA.

Farangiz Atamuradova is a Program Officer in the Research and Analysis Department at Hedayah in the United Arab Emirates.

Maura Conway is Paddy Moriarty Professor of Government and International Studies in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University and Professor of Cyber Threats in CYTREC at Swansea University, UK.