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RECONCILING IMPACT AND ETHICS

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF RESEARCH IN VIOLENT ONLINE POLITICAL EXTREMISM

Dounia Mahlouly

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About the author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Gathering empirical evidence from interviews and focus groups, this study highlights some of the ethical dilemmas faced by the academic community tasked with developing new methodological tools and conceptual frameworks for the study of violent online political extremism. At the same time it examines how academics position themselves in relation to a broad range of non-academic stakeholders involved in the public debate about where violent extremism, terrorism and the Internet intersect. It argues that these external actors are introducing a multisectoral 'market' for research on online violent extremism, which creates both opportunities and limitations for the academic community. Finally, it analyses how academics from across a range of disciplines will be able to secure access to data and competitive research tools, while also engaging in a critical reflection about the ethical considerations at stake.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents an overview of existing gaps and future methodological challenges in the field of 'violent online political extremism', which is the terminology utilised by VOX-Pol to define its area of interest.[1] The research into violent online political extremism carried out within the framework introduced by the consortium relates to a large, interdisciplinary body of academic knowledge on the ideological discourse, social structure, recruitment and communication strategy of groups and individuals advocating political violence online. The designation 'violent online political extremism' allows VOX-Pol researchers to examine the relationship between distinct forms of online behaviours and extremist content, ranging from far-right nationalist hate speech to jihadi propaganda. It thus enables them to navigate different conceptual approaches to online extremism while drawing on a wide diversity of empirical methods commonly applied in terrorism studies, psychology, criminology, communication studies, computer sciences and the digital humanities.

In recent years, the development of such a broad interdisciplinary framework has brought new ethical and methodological challenges. Owing to its highly topical nature, violent online political extremism has attracted the attention of policymakers and practitioners with an interest in countering and preventing violent extremism (CVE/PVE) within law enforcement, civil society and the tech industry. Academic

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1   "VOX-Pol's interest is in exploring how violent extremist politics plays out 'online,' by which is generally meant the Internet. In terms of the type of politics being referred to, it is political activity situated at the outermost ends (i.e. the extremities) of any political spectrum. The centre of any such spectrum is generally held to be moderate; extremism may thus be conceived as the opposite, in either direction, of moderation. (...) The qualifier 'violent' is therefore employed here to describe VOX-Pol's interest, which is in those that employ or advocate physical violence against other individuals and groups to forward their political objectives." VOX-Pol official website, www.voxpol.eu/about-us.

experts are increasingly expected to engage with the spheres of policy and practice in order to demonstrate impact. This brings them to play an active role in shaping public knowledge of violent online political extremism, while at the same time having to reflect critically on the media and political environments in which this issue is being debated. The imperative of impact puts pressure on academics to approach this highly politicised topic from an angle that reflects the needs and priorities of non-academic stakeholders willing to invest in research. In this context, public discourse is, arguably, likely to influence conceptual approaches to violent online political extremism. This raises ethical considerations.

Furthermore, academics are limited by a combination of ethical constraints that comes with collecting and manipulating security-sensitive data for research purposes. In recent years, the volume of material identifiable as violent extremist has fluctuated in the mainstream social media sphere (Conway et al. 2017). On the one hand, extremist narratives subjected to censorship are now more likely to be found on encrypted social platforms (Ebner, 2017; Winter, 2017). Researching these types of narratives requires access to privacy-protected data, which adds to the complexity of the ethical framework in which the academic community operates. On the other hand, new forms of online violent extremism that have emerged are harder to identify, because they insidiously incorporate mainstream political debates (Beirich and Buchanan, 2018; Stocker, 2017). This is evident from the rise of far-right nationalist parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the British National Party (BNP) or Fratelli d'Italia in the mainstream political sphere, as well as from the visibility of pro alt-right narratives on popular social platforms such as 4Chan. To account for these recent developments, academics will have to expand conceptual definitions of violent online political extremism in future years. However, as is evident from the above, the evolution of the field will depend to a large extent on their ability to reconcile considerations of ethics, methodology and impact.

This study anticipates future challenges by focusing on the interplay between ethics, methodology and impact. It uses an ethnographic approach to reflect on the perspectives and experiences of academic researchers with expertise in violent online political extremism. It relies

on a combination of two *empirical strand*s (interviews and focus groups) to assess under what conditions academia will be able to engage in dialogue with practitioners from law enforcement, civil society or the tech industry. It discusses the ethical implications of academia's involvement with the spheres of policy and practice, and considers how methodologies will be able to evolve within the ethical framework applicable to the study of violent online political extremism.

THE NEXUS OF IMPACT, ETHICS AND METHODS

In a recent paper outlining her suggestions for progressing research into online violent extremism, Conway (2017) identifies some of the challenges that the academic community will be facing in the future. Among other things, she draws our attention to questions relating to "Internet research ethics" and "the role of Internet companies as political intermediaries" (2017: 92). Indeed, experts working in the field of violent online political extremism are increasingly interested in sharing their perspectives and experiences on the question of ethics (Edwards, 2018; King, 2018; Winkler, 2018). Following VOX-Pol's "Ethics in Terrorism Research" workshop in April 2018, researchers reflected on a series of ethical issues, ranging from managing collaboration with law enforcement practitioners (Edwards, 2018) to mitigating the risks incurred by researchers when analysing violent content (King, 2018). These discussions give us an indication of the degree to which impact and methods might determine one's approach to ethics in the field of violent online political extremism.

Unlike many research topics involving social science expertise, the study of violent online political extremism leads academics to cover topical and policy-relevant subjects that feature prominently on the agendas of various policy institutes, tech companies and government institutions, such as the military and law enforcement. These institutional actors are well placed to support academic research by providing access to data and sharing empirical knowledge or funding specific research projects, depending on their interests and priorities. Academia would, it appears, have much to gain from improving its dialogue with this community of practice, quite apart from the need to produce impactful research. However, as I will argue, some researchers fear that seeking opportunities for partnerships might subject academic research to corporate or political influence – a concern that has been raised in the past in relation to terrorism studies (Stampnitzky, 2013; Kundnani, 2014).

In addition to the above, one of the methodological challenges ahead lies in the difficulty of mapping the evolution of extremist narratives over time and across social platforms. Developing sophisticated, reliable research tools to analyse these processes quantitatively requires securing access to large datasets, which is hard to achieve if the data in question is censored or protected by encryption. The possibility of effective qualitative research is, then, necessarily hampered by the lack of access to such datasets.

Besides identifying gaps in the existing literature, this paper looks at the nexus between ethics, impact and methods in order to analyse how these challenges might affect prospects for future research. This study is structured around three axes (cf. Figure 1; Table 1) and is designed to highlight how these parameters overlap. The first axis looks at the dialectic between ethics and methods, while the second and third axes explore the intersections between methods and impact, and impact and ethics, respectively. In the context of this ethnography, the author of this report refers to *methods* or *methodology* as the set of research tools as well as the ontological approaches and conceptual frameworks applied in the field.

Figure 1. The nexus of ethics, impact and methods in the field of violent online political extremism
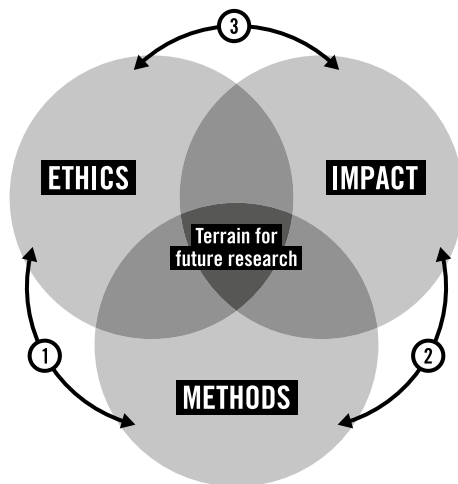
METHODOLOGY

This research was designed around two *empirical strands*, both relying on different ethnographic methods. First, 20 unstructured face-to-face interviews were conducted with academic and non-academic experts. The sample of participants was composed of academics, civil society actors involved in online counter-narrative campaigns, representatives from policy institutes and consultants working for public and private CVE initiatives (cf. Table 2). Research interests varied between the criminology of terrorism, radicalisation, jihadi propaganda, hate speech, far-right extremism, digital anthropology, computer sciences and gender and terrorism. Fifteen out of the 20 participants interviewed were academics with expertise in political sciences, media and communication studies, psychology, criminology, computer sciences or the humanities. Unstructured interviews were designed to explore what participants regarded as the main gaps in the existing literature and how to improve research practices from the perspectives of ethics, methods and impact.

Figure 2. Research design

EMPIRICAL STRAND I

20 face-to-face qualitative interviews with academic experts and practitioners

EMPIRICAL STRAND II

Focus group sessions held at the 2018 VOX-Pol conference (Amsterdam)

The second *empirical strand* consisted of a focus group held at the 2018 VOX-Pol conference. Professionals and academics attending the event were invited to participate in an afternoon of discussion on future research in the field of violent online political extremism, which was divided into two focus group sessions. Ten experts attended the

afternoon workshop and a sample of six participants was selected for each of the focus group sessions. The audience was composed of six representatives of the academic community (senior researchers and PhD students from across the social sciences) and four practitioners working for CVE initiatives, law-enforcement organisations and policy institutes. During the first session, participants were asked to comment on each of the four areas for potential challenges listed above. After being presented with the preliminary findings of face-to-face interviews (*empirical strand* 1), they took part in a follow-up focus group session, in which they were asked to share their views and experiences based on interviewees' statements. The data collected from the focus group was used to validate the findings of the first *empirical strand*. Participants were informed that the findings of the focus group would be used for this study.

IDENTIFYING EXISTING GAPS

When asked to identify areas of development for future research, most interviewees pointed to the need for a shift of focus towards far-right nationalist hate speech. They emphasised the fact that, while recent debates put the emphasis on insurgent propaganda, nationalist hate speech had insidiously incorporated mainstream political discourses. In order to account for this phenomenon, future research should examine online extremism from the perspective of rising populism and identity politics. Other participants suggested that a comparative approach could be applied to analyse the reciprocities between different extremist ideologies and determine the degree to which extremist narratives may feed into each other in an environment of polarisation.

Some participants insisted that future research should explore further the relationship between online and offline behaviour, and investigate the conditions under which exposure to online extremist narratives might translate into cognitive or behavioural processes of radicalisation:

> *We assume a lot in terms of associating risks with people consuming extremist material online. We are nowhere near sophisticated in our knowledge about how that translates into practice and behaviour offline including acts of violence, or even just supporting acts of violence.*

Participant 13

Researchers interested in this question suggested developing more sophisticated conceptual frameworks that could account for different potential reactions to violent online political extremism depending on the audience. Refining theory would enable the academic community to cover the topic from a deductive angle, which would compensate for the fact that inductive and exploratory research remain limited by ethics:

> *I don't think we understand how propaganda works or why propaganda is useful, how it impacts the consumer, whether they are adversaries or whether they are supporters or would-be supporters, or people that are already radicalised. I think a huge amount of assumptions are made about it … intuitive assumptions … Many of them could be correct… But it has left us with a sense of it being a very linear relation between propaganda and action, when I don't think it's necessarily as linear as that. It is impossible to ethically determine the impact of propaganda.*

Participant 5

According to many participants, understanding the risks of exposure to extremist content required scientific contributions from the fields of psychology and social psychology. Criminologists argued that this might help explain individuals' personal trajectories, shifting focus away from the macro-level perspective of political sciences. Alternatively, social psychology could help reframe the academic debate around questions relating to inter-group relations and prejudice.

Computer scientists indicated that progress had already been made in applying text-based research tools (social network analysis, sentiment analysis and keyword-retrieval software) to identify trends, map networks of activities and produce a *grounded theory*[2] of extremist narratives. In their view, one of the main methodological challenges in years to come would be the development of technologies capable of processing video-based content. Experimenting with this type of research tool would enable the academic community to understand the limitations of the technologies applied by law enforcement practitioners.

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2   A theory relying on standardised data collection and analysis of data procedures (Urquhart, 2013).

During the course of the ethnography, academic experts were, indeed, sceptical as to the reliability of the UK Home Office tool designed to detect pro-ISIS audio and video material online. The tool in question, which has reportedly been trained to identify relevant content on an original dataset of over 1,000 videos (Lee, 2018; Lomas, 2018), recognised specific features of ISIS propaganda based on how propaganda had been recently circulating online. There was, however, little guarantee that this technology could flag less visually characteristic or explicit forms of extremist content with a reasonably high accuracy rate. Academic experts were curious as to how such a tool could flag new extremist content.

Computer scientists hoping to design technologies for academic research insisted that, to produce relevant results with a high accuracy rate, research tools would need to process a large quantity of data and to be operated by social scientists on a very large scale:

> *This research topic is constantly changing in the way it is expressed both in text and in images, and so the tools have to allow for that – they need to be opened and they need to help discover a trend and encode new discoveries as they go along. And ideally, of course, that means the tools should have a certain self-learning capacity. So that engineers don't continuously have to babysit them... No. The tools should be aware of this fluid character of the phenomena. (...) Self-learning, but with as few interactions [with users] and as little data as possible.*
>
> **Participant 14**

During the focus group sessions, however, this idea was challenged by social scientists, who advocated using research tools in combination with traditional qualitative methods like ethnography, discourse analysis or semiotic analysis. They feared that the desire to quantify, classify and encode extremisms would limit our understanding of violent online political extremism to a set of normative definitions

with little consideration of the complex social and cognitive processes at work. This argument revealed differing ontological views within the academic community studying violent online political extremism. Researchers leaning towards a constructionist approach appeared to be particularly critical of the use of technology to identify patterns of online behaviours or to categorise social networks on the basis of users' similarities and common interests. Some participants suggested that future research could, in this regard, assess whether the 'echo-chamber' effect of certain social platforms could explain the rise of mutually exclusive political identities online. Alternatively, academics belonging to the positivist school of thought saw benefits in computing large-scale quantitative research. This revealed that perspectives on methods, impact and ethics vary significantly depending on ontological approaches. As the author of this study will argue, in future years, learning how to reconcile these traditions may be one of the biggest challenges for academics building theory on violent online political extremism.

MAPPING THE NEXUS OF IMPACT, METHODS AND ETHICS

Table 1. Nexus of impact, methods and ethics

1. ETHICS AND METHODS	2. IMPACT AND METHODS	3. IMPACT AND ETHICS
• Manipulating data originating from illicit sources	• Aligning with terminology commonly applied in the spheres of policy and practice	• Competing vs partnering with non-academic stakeholders
• Limited access to data, owing to censorship	• Divisions within the academic community: critical vs impact-driven approaches	• Risks incurred by researchers exposed to violent content
• Legal/ethical restrictions on analysing privacy-protected content		• Engaging with media and political debates
• Improving research tools with limited access to data		

The first axis relates to the interplay between ethics and method. This section underlines some of the methodological constraints generated by the legal and ethical frameworks for research on violent online political extremism.

The second axis considers the relationship between impact and methods. Ethnographic evidence is used to examine how academic experts interact with the spheres of policy and practice, and whether this interaction influences terminologies and research practices.

The third axis looks at the intersection between impact and ethics. This section of the report examines how researchers understand their ethical responsibility when engaging in public debates on violent

online political extremism or when partnering with external stakeholders or CVE practitioners from law enforcement, the military or the tech industry.

ETHICS AND METHODS

In order to circumvent surveillance and censorship, internet users disseminating extremist content tend to migrate to encrypted social platforms (Conway et al., 2017). Violent online political extremism researchers thus find themselves having to navigate the ethical risks associated with handling not only security-sensitive and illicit material, but also privacy-protected data. Extracting data online could infringe data protection rules if individuals' personal identities are traceable. For example, IP addresses are generally regarded as personal data and it is difficult to use them without obtaining informed consent. Some jurisdictions may occasionally allow the use of privacy-protected data for research, if scientific interests clearly outweigh the risks of violating privacy, and if the research in question could not be conducted otherwise. In Europe, research projects that meet these criteria then need to be executed in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which requires data-management procedures to be tailored to ensure that sensitive information is safely stored and processed (Thomas et al., 2017). These regulations pose particular challenges when researchers seek ethical approval to extract data from encrypted platforms, such as Telegram.

Beyond the issue of privacy, violent online political extremism research may, from an ethical perspective, be considered high-risk if data is being extracted from illicit sources. In the UK, ethical approval and institutional oversight are required for any research involving terrorist material. These measures are intended to ensure compliance with the 2006 Terrorism Act, which prohibits the possession and dissemination of terrorist material. As stated in the 2012 Universities UK report on the oversight of security-sensitive research:

> *Researchers may not only download material that is security sensitive but also visit security-sensitive websites. Such visits may be interpreted by police as evidence of sympathy for, and perhaps even willingness to collude with, terrorism. (...) Sections 2 and 3 of chapter 11 of the Terrorism Act (2006) outlaw the dissemination of terrorist publications, including by electronic means, and give a very wide definition of 'terrorist publication' and 'statements' that could be construed as endorsing or promoting terrorism.*

Universities UK, 2012:3–5

Experts analysing terrorist material also face ethical challenges when designing experimental research to study audiences' responses to extremist content (Winkler, 2018). In a paper exploring the impact of exposure to ISIS propaganda videos, Cottee and Cunliffe (2017: 7) show that, in order to meet all expectations for ethical approval, the parameters of such an experiment have to be modified to the point where the validity of research findings eventually becomes questionable. This demonstrates the extent to which legal definitions of extremism raise concerns about the liability of academic institutions studying violent online political extremism.

The spheres of policy and practice, in which those legal definitions are debated and established, have a considerable influence over the methods used to develop conceptual definitions of 'extremism'. Depending on whether they are planning to research online hate speech or terrorist content, academics have to refer to different legal definitions (Brown and Cowls, 2015) – which would not involve the same kind of ethical concerns, and might translate into different research methods and practices – even though the academic community understands these narratives as being equally relevant to conceptual definition(s) of violent online political extremism.

For instance, researchers interviewed for this study observe that certain forms of hate speech insidiously incorporate mainstream political discourses, which leads them to question the traditional conception of 'extremist' as being 'situated at the outermost ends of any political spectrum':[3]

> *Extremisms are increasingly trying to become more ... subtle in their approach to how they promote hatred. (...) The bottom line of what we understand as hate speech is starting to change because it is harder to identify (...) because the messages, even if they are in this extremist form ... they are becoming increasingly mainstream.*
>
> **Participant 13**

In the future, researchers might want to compare these less explicit forms of hate speech with outright expressions of extremism to assess whether they could in fact be conceptualised under the same theoretical framework. This could enable them to challenge the commonly accepted definition of hate speech and expand our understanding of violent online political extremism. Violent narratives that have been incorporated into legitimate political discourses are, however, unlikely to come under the same legal definitions as those that have been formally recognised as advocating extremism. As a result, different ethical and methodological considerations may apply in each case.

Academics are eager to develop a holistic conceptual framework for this field of research, and they hope to shed light on the nuances and complexities of the socio-political and cognitive processes underlying violent online political extremism. They admit that this also entails challenging normative views, given that what they regard as relevant to the conceptual definition of extremism goes beyond the legal frameworks in which extremisms are defined. Yet the ethical and methodological frameworks in which they operate are, to a large extent, contingent

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3   VOX-Pol official website: www.voxpol.eu/about-us.

on the legal definitions applied in the spheres of policy and practice. Before moving onto the question of impact and ethics, therefore, it is important to consider how much this could affect their ability to question conventional approaches to extremism.

METHODS AND IMPACT

Beyond ethical considerations, the imperative of impact forces academics to engage with the terminology used to debate violent online political extremism in the spheres of policy and practice. Some participants, however, argue that this terminology is too contentious and politicised to underpin the conceptual and methodological frameworks of research on violent online political extremism:

> *There is no consensus on the terminology. (…) I don't know if this is informed by policymakers or by the press, but in the UK we have this big juggling of terrorism content, extremism content and hate speech. And (…) they are different legal entities. (…) For me it is a pyramid: terrorist content is less obvious but it is illegal so it is at the top; then you have a bigger category, which is extremist content; and then at the bottom you have hate speech, which, unfortunately, is broad, and it exists in a lot of spaces. (…) If governments are taking a strong, outward role on this, then we need to use the right vocabulary. Because we will be held to account by others.*

Participant 7

Academics agree in saying that impactful research should contribute to clarifying the terminology applied by practitioners and policymakers involved in the debate around (violent) (online) political extremism. They disagree, however, on the value of impact, depending on their ontological perspectives and their sensitivity to the politicisation of violent extremism.

On the one hand, some researchers believe that aligning with this terminology will enable them to formulate policy recommendations relevant to the context in which violent online political extremism is being addressed today. Other academics, on the other hand, are interested in critiquing the media and political discourses that shape perceptions not just of violent online political extremism, but of extremism in general. The terminology applicable in the spheres of policy and practice is still crucial when it comes to producing impactful arguments. In this case, however, it tends to be approached from a critical perspective. Owing to the highly politicised nature of the topic, the academic community remains divided on how to achieve impact. From a constructionist point of view, conceptualising violent online political extremism through the lens of policy and practice might lead us to the relationship between *discourses on extremism* – as they are approached in the tradition of critical terrorism studies – and *extremist discourses.* The two are, however, regarded as equally relevant to the study of violent online political extremism within this ontological tradition. As a result, academics develop very different ways of negotiating considerations of impact across disciplines and schools of thought.

This is evident not only from participants' perspectives on terminology but also from their concerns about the dissemination of findings from research in the field of violent online political extremism. In order to demonstrate impact, experts occasionally feel the need to advertise their research activities and show that they can uncover newsworthy material. In doing so, they help draw attention to the extremist narratives being studied.

> *[The main difficulty is in] avoiding the trap of actually doing propaganda work for terrorist organisations. There are some kinds of [experts] for example, who, you know, just basically tweet #IslamicState stuff or #ISpropaganda and it is basically doing propaganda work for the organisation, and I think there needs to be a line between that and a proper critical analysis of the material.*

Participant 6

In becoming more active in the public debate on violent online political extremism, researchers take on an ethical responsibility that is similar to that of journalists covering issues of terrorism. Promoting their expertise on the subject helps give political significance to these issues, and this, in return, feeds into the media and political debates on extremism (Berger, 2018). As a result, the terminology becomes increasingly politicised and, arguably, harder to conceptualise.

ETHICS AND IMPACT

As argued above, the extent to which research on violent online political extremism should demonstrate impact raises different ethical questions, which have yet to be openly addressed by the academic community. These questions may, indeed, contribute to a rethink of the current ethical framework of the field in future years. The ethnography undertaken for this study confirms that governmental organisations, tech companies, law enforcement, the military and civil society are all playing a major role in funding, promoting and relaying policy-oriented research on violent online political extremism.

Between September 2016 and September 2018, the author of this report represented the consortium at 17 events at which a wide range of experts and practitioners were gathered. Out of these 17 events, only four were academic conferences. They covered research topics ranging from digital media campaigning to offline propaganda in the Middle East. They featured research projects that were not labelled as research on 'online extremism' yet could nevertheless be considered conceptually relevant to the field of violent online political extremism. The remaining 13 events consisted of networking workshops, press conferences, training sessions, professional seminars and round tables attended by CVE and PVE practitioners from the military, civil society and the public sector as well as non-academic experts from various policy institutes. Funders, partners and host organisations included the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the US Department of

Defense and Facebook, amongst others. These events welcomed only a small minority of representatives from academia. They benefited from more resources than academic events do, and were designed differently, in order to develop a community of practice for CVE and PVE professionals. This illustrates the fact that non-academic stakeholders are playing a leading role in producing and sharing knowledge about violent online political extremism.

Faced with this reality, researchers understand that academia should collaborate – rather than compete – with the spheres of policy and practice. However, when asked about funding or partnership opportunities involving non-academic stakeholders, interviewees remind us once again that high impact comes with greater ethical liability:

> *What is our moral position in researching this stuff? And if we find things that authorities would want to be aware of, or if we want to be involved in or funded by government initiatives that are very targeted as counter-extremism measures, is that ethical? Is that OK?*
>
> **Participant 3**

The first and probably most overlooked ethical consideration relates to researcher welfare. In some cases, experts in violent online political extremism, who are regularly exposed to online violent content, may experience psychological distress or trauma. This adds to the fact that, as exemplified above, the socio-political context in which violent online political extremism is debated becomes, in itself, relatively distressful. Yet whereas other institutions interested in monitoring violent online political extremism benefit from a certain level of welfare, academia lacks the resources to guide scholars and help them mitigate the risks they incur:

> *Researcher welfare is an important thing that I personally spend a lot of time thinking about. I know that other people spending their time looking at propaganda think about [it] as well. Especially in this area, because you have exposure to law enforcement, government and military people, social media corporations... All of us doing kind of the same sort of thing. We are all looking at propaganda a lot. But there is a sliding scale of welfare for these people. So, at the top of that you get social media people that get flexible hours, free yoga (literally free yoga [laugh]) and 24-hour therapy, all that stuff. Then you have law enforcement and they don't have free yoga, but they have flexible hours to a degree, football on Thursdays, that kind of thing... And then academia, where you have nothing. I do all this research, no one has considered that I have taken my own emotional trauma into account. Like I see a therapist, but I went to see him on my own initiative, it took me quite some time to get to that point. And even then, it's the therapist who, as I am talking about a beheading video... they would go 'oh' [put his hands around his neck] in shock. [...] There's only so much thinking about that you can do without having any resources available.*

Participant 5

Concerns over welfare are, in reality, central to the ethics of researching violent online political extremism, because they dictate academics' ability to deliberate over the conceptual definition of online extremism in an intellectually safe environment. Improving researcher welfare would require a fairly equal level of resources between institutions producing knowledge about violent online political extremism. It could help ensure that academic arguments and scientific approaches are not subjected to any commercial or political agenda, thereby empowering the academic community in its dialogue with non-academic stakeholders. Academic institutions could, alternatively, monitor welfare as part of the oversight of research ethics in violent online political extremism. Acknowledging the institutional responsibility of academia with regard

to the wellbeing of researchers would help to make the ethical framework for the study of violent extremism, terrorism and the Internet more consistent. In such an environment, academics would be better placed to advocate for ethical practices in the monitoring of violent online political extremism when engaging with non-academic stakeholders.

Interviewees agree that academic research on violent online political extremism will most likely not be self-reliant in the coming years, given that experts will increasingly need to collaborate with different agencies in order to secure funding. Academics believe that opportunities for successful partnerships will depend on the motives of potential partners. They are particularly concerned about the fact that governments and corporate agencies could support academic research in an attempt to gain legitimacy when promoting particular approaches to PVE/CVE. For example, they express reservations with regard to the potential contribution tech companies could make to academic research on violent online political extremism:

> *The [tech] companies… I am increasingly cynical and not particularly hopeful. Because it increasingly seems to me that they do exactly what they need to do for good PR and no more. And they announce innovative approaches that will help their public image, and nothing ever comes out of them. So I am increasingly cynical that we [academia] are going to get anything from companies like Google and Facebook. I just don't know that we can create useful partnerships with those companies.*

Participant 16

Participants also point to the fact that new ethical challenges may arise when the debate around policy responses to violent online political extremism takes place in a contentious political environment.

As the following participant suggests, academics who are willing to engage with the spheres of policy and practice may find it difficult to raise awareness about the nuances and complexities of the issue when it is being debated in a particularly polarised political environment:

> *Personally, the ethical considerations I had regarded the process through which my work, writings and analyses could easily be manipulated. I have the impression as a researcher to be in a society that increasingly mirrors the binary and totalitarian ideology of jihadism and that wants to designate a homogenous enemy and deprive him of its nuance and complexity. The real ethical question is how can we re-introduce complexity in a society that reacts by becoming as binary as that of its enemy.*

Participant 11

Academics whose research topic is considered highly sensitive and likely to highlight the polarisation of the debate become wary and sceptical as to the benefits of their potential engagement with the spheres of policy and practice. They anticipate conflicts of interest with the corporate and political actors that come to position themselves on the issue, and fear that partnering with external stakeholders might affect their integrity and intellectual credibility.

Another group of participants remains, by contrast, confident that practitioners are genuinely interested in learning from the academic perspective. As argued earlier, they understand impact as mutual and believe that such partnerships enable academia to gain knowledge from practitioners' experience.

> *The police and other stakeholders are an important part of research. Some researchers think that as soon as you are partnering with them that... somehow you have watered down your scientific credibility. But in my experience, what these stakeholders want is a critical partner. They want somebody who can bring social science expertise to address a social problem. [...] And the tech companies are actually far better placed to have an effective impact on these positions. [...] I think there is a lot that we can learn from this crime prevention scene and apply to [the] violent extremism space.*

Participant 11

These researchers argue that impact can indeed be truly reciprocal if academics manage to express the nuances and complexities of this issue in a language that practitioners and other non-academic stakeholders may be able to understand:

> *I work with a lot of law enforcement people too and I think the problem is, a lot of them are expecting to click Enter and right away be able to identify the bad guy. [...] But I think the first step is to try and engage with these stakeholders and try to speak the language that they speak as well, instead of trying to speak from a strictly academic perspective. [...] To try and have an open dialogue around the complexities associated with trying to counter violent political extremism on the internet.*
>
> **Participant 13**

These statements indicate that the academic community is again divided as to the relationship between impact and ethics. In the context of this study, two opposing approaches divide scholars from the field of security studies or criminology from social scientists in digital anthropology, communication or critical terrorism studies. Besides the differences in ontological approaches, the former have a pragmatic attitude to collaborating with law enforcement professionals in order to inform CVE practices, while the latter are more sceptical – and often critical – of the security perspective. Researchers who collaborate with law enforcement practitioners believe they are criticised by their peers for compromising their position as unbiased and independent observers, because they might be expected to challenge the way in which extremism is defined from a security perspective.

These academics occasionally feel excluded from academic circles with a more critical stance on CVE practices. Conversely, critiquing the spheres of policy and practice is, in their view, very limiting in terms of funding and impact. As a result, researchers come to rely on different methods and funding strategies depending on whether they take a sceptical or a pragmatic position on impact in the field of violent online political extremism. And yet, as mentioned above, the entire

academic community would benefit greatly from combining these different methodological skills, in the future. This would help ensure that recent findings in the study of violent online political extremism produce fundamental long-term research as well as impactful policy recommendations.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the academic community may be able to overcome the ethical and methodological challenges to come by reconciling ontological perspectives on impact. In the future, researchers will have no choice but to think creatively and collaboratively about methodologies that could deal with increasingly complex ethical issues. This could be achieved by bridging the gap between a constructionist critique of the debate on violent online political extremism and a more pragmatic or policy-oriented approach. The development of a network of excellence like VOX-Pol was the first step towards interdisciplinary dialogue. This report highlighted that, although academics are equally concerned with securing access to data, they disagree as to the ethical dimension(s) of impact. Diverging sensitivities about this subject suggest that academia is unable to secure the resources needed to investigate this field without encountering potential conflicts of interest with external stakeholders. Improving researchers' welfare thus becomes all the more important.

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APPENDIX

Table 2. Interviews: Sample of participants

PARTICIPANT NUMBER	POSITION	EXPERTISE
Participant 1	Academic	Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa
Participant 2	Practitioner	Preventing violent extremism
Participant 3	Academic	Terrorism studies
Participant 4	Academic	Media and communication studies
Participant 5	Academic	Terrorism studies
Participant 6	Consultant	ISIS propaganda
Participant 7	Consultant	Islamist extremism
Participant 8	Law enforcement	Preventing violent extremism
Participant 9	Academic	Digital anthropology, data science
Participant 10	Academic & consultant	Terrorism studies
Participant 11	Academic	Terrorism studies
Participant 12	Academic & consultant	Criminology, far right extremism
Participant 13	Academic & consultant	Far right extremism
Participant 14	Academic	Artificial intelligence
Participant 15	Academic & consultant	Psychology, political violence
Participant 16	Academic	Terrorism studies
Participant 17	Academic	Terrorism studies
Participant 18	Academic	Security studies
Participant 19	Academic	Terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa
Participant 20	Practitioner	Terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa

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