RESEARCHING THE FAR RIGHT SAFELY IN ACADEMIA

CURRENT PRACTICES AND CONSTRAINTS

Antonia Vaughan

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About the author

Dr. Antonia Vaughan recently completed a PhD in Politics, Languages and International Studies at the University of Bath. Her thesis investigated the ethics of researching the far right – including researcher safety – and the mainstreaming of the far right online.

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCHERS OF RISKY topics have benefitted from a burgeoning literature on researcher safety, including that specifically focused on researching the far right (Pearson et al. 2023; Pruden 2024; Gelashvili and Gagnon 2024; Sibley 2024). Much of this literature has focused on tackling urgent concerns and providing practical advice, targeting the individual and the institution. Drawing on 21 interviews with researchers of the far right and manosphere, this report complements these efforts by detailing how researcher safety is impacted by environmental factors. Focusing on three key stakeholders – the institution, the manager and the researcher themselves – the report illustrates how individual efforts and interactions between stakeholders have significant implications for safety and underlines the need to situate researchers within the academic context.

Arguing that barriers to safety pivot on both what is known about risk and what is possible to mitigate, the report highlights areas to focus on to improve both current and future practice. To examine the impact of stakeholders and how their interactions have an impact on safety, this report proposes a matrix highlighting the varying roles, responsibilities and capabilities of each actor. In doing so, it illustrates the necessity of understanding the researcher within a broader framework rather than focusing on the researcher in isolation. These findings contribute to concerns about the ability of researchers to safeguard themselves, and the importance of environmental factors in affecting the safety of researchers. Although focused on researchers of the far right, the findings are likely applicable to researchers of extremism more broadly, who face similar harms in the same environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

INCREASING ATTENTION HAS been paid to the risks of researching the far right with an aim to minimise harm associated with the work as far as possible. Efforts have particularly focused on identifying the risks and risk mitigation strategies, oriented around the individual and the institution (Pearson et al. 2023; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). These efforts find that whilst risk is not inevitable or necessarily exceptional, researchers are vulnerable and experience harm. Using interviews with researchers of the far right and manosphere, this report complements these efforts by considering how researchers' abilities to manage risk are constrained by environmental factors.[1] Facing particular pressures as new entrants to the field, it focuses on the experiences of early-career researchers, navigating professional and personal safety demands.

These harms are endemic to the topic, and (for online harms) increasingly to the academic environment. Whilst much of the (scant) risk mitigation advice is directed towards the researcher, the field as a whole is moving away from individual resilience towards highlighting the importance of institutions and managers for supporting researchers to mitigate risk more effectively (Pearson et al. 2023; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021; Brown et al. 2024). Literature recognises that structural harms cannot be fully mitigated at the individual level, emphasising how key stakeholders can act as compounding forces to enhance or undermine the safety of researchers (Pearson et al. 2023). This report reinforces that conclusion, demonstrating that adherence to best practice can only do so much to protect researchers.

1 By environmental factors I mean trends broadly present in academia, such as precarity, a challenging job market, the increasing importance of impact in the assessment of research's 'value', and financial insecurity.

As new entrants to the field, the interviewees were knowledgeable about the existence of risk but did not know what shape that risk would take or how to protect against it. A dearth of relevant guidance challenged their ability to be informed; thus, to become knowledgeable, they often experienced or observed harm. With a lack of guidance and training, safe behaviour becomes akin to a hidden curriculum.[2] As a result, the norms and behaviours relating to risk and researcher safety are learned implicitly rather than explicitly taught, often through observing others' behaviour or receiving advice shared within personal networks – for example, avoiding publishing work on certain topics or in certain spaces. Researcher (dis)engagement is common, with many of the interviewees detailing barriers to implementing risk mitigation guidance, such as competing pressures, disillusionment with their ability to mitigate risk and resignation to being harmed.

Managers (or supervisors) can be less likely to be knowledgeable, often because of a lack of available guidance, direct expertise or relevant training, relying on the same resources as the researcher. Yet they are often engaged with the researcher despite their lack of knowledge, providing a supportive working environment. Finally, the interviewees' institutions are often uninformed, requiring education on the risks and risk mitigations. Some institutions are engaged and were willing to support, but equally many absolve themselves of responsibility, framing risk management as an individual's concern. The emphasis on individual responsibility is partly explained by the neoliberal turn in academia (Tight 2019), but may also be because the multi-disciplinarity of extremism research "limits the visibility of the project as a field of study", leading institutions to view harassment as isolated incidents rather than a systemic issue within the field (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021, p. 462). Additionally, institutions

2 Sambell and McDowell (1998, pp. 391–392) define this as "what is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction".

may not wish to engage in what they perceive to be 'politically charged debates' or be accused of quashing legitimate critique[3] (O'Meara et al. 2024).

The broad lack of knowledge within the system reduces the likelihood that all risks are known, and thus reduces stakeholders' ability to act and proactively mitigate the harm. The lack of engagement by key stakeholders reduces risk management to a single point of failure – emphasising individual rather than structural resilience. This conceptualisation of risk management is arguably informed by the neoliberal environment where "success and failure are understood as triumphs and tragedies of individual design" (Banks, cited in Scharff 2016, p. 222). However, this focus omits a consideration of how environmental factors create constraints on researchers being safe that cannot be managed at the individual level, and how 'safe' behaviour can be disincentivised (Massanari 2018).

The report first briefly details the harms researchers have experienced, drawing on the interviews and recent literature. Not all researchers have experienced harm, or to the same degree, but most of the interviewees expected to at some point in the future. A number of participants reflected on the inherent risk, that it is "part of the line of work I chose" (A2). The harms varied in frequency, severity and impact, moderated by amount of experience, proximity to the research subject, topic and research methodology. The interviewees are highly aware of the risk involved in researching inherently violent politics, many choosing this topic due to their identity or experiences prior to beginning the research. However, despite an expectation and knowledge of harm (and somewhat of how to mitigate it), the interviews showed that risk is not always being mitigated to the fullest extent possible. Specifically, there are gaps in both what is known and what is possible in the academic system.

To understand how each of the key stakeholders impacts on risk, this report proposes a matrix, evaluating knowledge of, and engagement with, risk. This matrix incorporates the differing

3 Meredith Pruden (2024, p. 156) has discussed hearing concerns that her research was "too contentious" when on the job market.

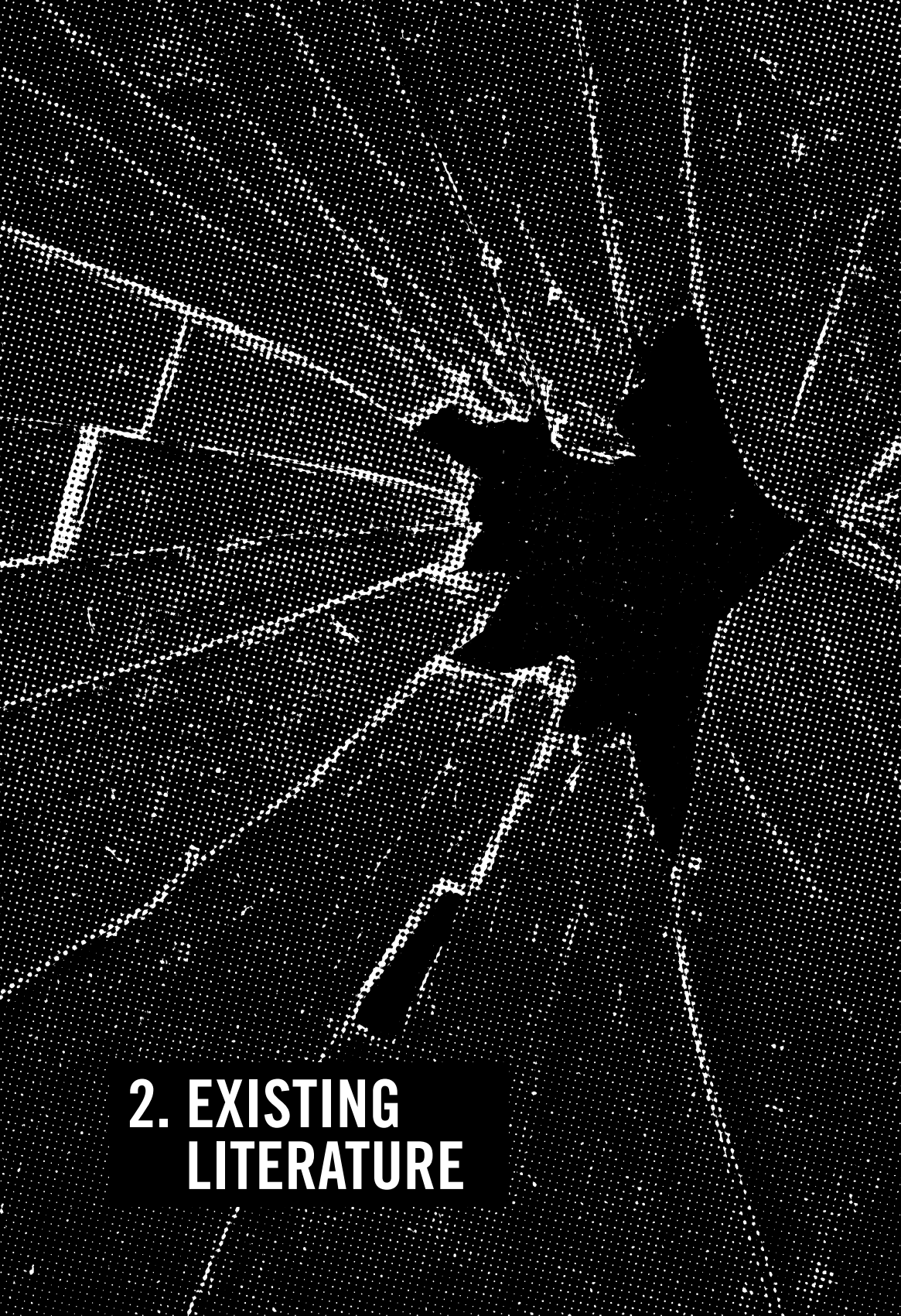
roles and capabilities of each actor, as well as the impacts of their interactions when their relationships intersect. These interactions are critically important, as the stakeholders work within a mutually interdependent system. The interactions are illustrated on a spectrum of effectiveness, with certain combinations more effective than others. The matrix shows that enhancing the knowledge of stakeholders increases the number of safeguards in the system, whilst engagement reduces the pressure on individuals and increases the pool of available resources.

Finally, this report explores how the current landscape in neoliberal higher education disincentivises safe behaviour by producing an antagonistic relationship between success and safety. The behaviours required for success entail visibility and productivity, whereas the behaviours required for safety involve healthy working practices and obscurity. With risk management an individual endeavour, this antagonism must be navigated by the individual researcher, with the cost often shouldered alone. The contradiction between success and safety particularly affects those at the sharp end of the far right,[4] who have to make decisions more privileged colleagues do not; the decisions become more fraught, with greater costs. Exacerbating this pressure, financial constraints and pervasive precarity can challenge researchers' abilities to utilise paid-for tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs), password managers and private mental health support. Ultimately, these experiences further underline how safe behaviour, knowledge and/or engagement are not a panacea for preventing harm. In doing so, the report argues

4 By using the descriptor 'at the sharp end', this is comprehensive to all researchers who are subject to harm from the far right, whether that be because of who they are, what they study or the intersection. Whilst identity is the most important and immovable aspect that the far right targets, their attacks are not exclusive to identity, but might be based on a political position, methodology or topic of study. As such, I use the broader term 'at the sharp end of the far right' to cover these victims too. Where identity impacts harm, I specifically name that.

that researchers must be situated within the academic environment to understand the risks they face, the barriers to managing them and the stakeholders involved.

This report demonstrates why the research environment is of primary consideration when seeking to improve researcher safety, as it has significant implications for increasing vulnerability. Fundamentally, risk management is not equally possible or achievable, especially when dealing with risks that are structural and environmental. Whilst individuals can take steps to mitigate risk to an extent, this report highlights how there are substantial constraints on researchers' abilities to mitigate risk that cannot be solved by individual approaches. By individualising the response to harassment, research is accessible only to those willing to 'put up with' harm, or those with identities that are less vulnerable and thus can make the 'choice' to participate. Overlooking this element means that we miss numerous opportunities to minimise harm and protect researchers, embedding harm within the work. Although this report draws on the experiences of researchers of a particular type of extremism, many of the findings are likely applicable to researchers of extremism more broadly, or those facing similar harms, especially those working within an academic context.



2. EXISTING LITERATURE

THERE IS A GROWING body of literature detailing the harms facing researchers of extremism and of the internet, including the overlap between the two, such as researchers of the far right online. Seeking to conceptualise and evidence the harm, authors have also worked to identify ways to ameliorate or manage it (Pearson et al. 2023; White 2022; Lakomy and Bożek 2023; Brown et al. 2024). This literature categorises the harm in varying ways, including internal or external harm, networked harassment,[5] cyber hate,[6] research-related trauma and vicarious trauma.

As part of building this evidence base, researchers have sought to understand the frequency and severity of harm. Pearson and colleagues (as part of the REASSURE project, 2023) found that more than two-thirds of interviewees (who researched extremism and terrorism broadly conceived) had experienced harm. All researchers interviewed by Gelashvili and Gagnon (2024) reported emotional challenges involved in the work, whilst "many" reported feeling uncomfortable or unsafe when interviewing or were concerned about online harassment. Of note, they also find that safety challenges differed depending on whether the researcher was researching parties or organisations and fringe groups (Gelashvili and Gagnon 2024). Brown et al. (2024) found that "many" of their participants had experienced research-related trauma, which they define as "trauma related to studying harmful content". When looking at academics as a population, Eslen-Ziya, Giorgi and Ahi (2023) found that approximately half of respondents had experienced online harassment, whilst Houlden et al. note it as "not particularly rare" (2021). Using experimental methods, Lakomy and Bożek (2023) demonstrate a connection between the content and experiencing harm, with three-quarters of participants agreeing that

5 Networked harassment has been defined by Rebecca Lewis (drawing on Marwick and Caplan) as a term which "describes a form of online harassment against a target or set of targets which is encouraged, promoted, or instigated by members of a network, such as an audience or online community" (Lewis, Marwick and Partin 2021, p. 736).

6 Cyber hate has been described by Charlotte Barlow and Imran Awan (2016) as involving "abusive online material, which can lead to actual 'real-world' violence, cyber violence, cyber stalking, and online harassment with the use of visual images, videos, and text".

"long-term exposure to online visual and audiovisual terrorist content can negatively affect the researcher's mood" (p. 14).

A common thread in this literature is the central importance of identity in mediating both the frequency and severity of harm (Conway 2021; Mattheis 2023; Criezis 2022). This is because the far right attacks certain identities more than others, but also because when analysing content close to their identities, researchers "are always already participants" (Conway 2021). Pearson et al. (2023, p. 48) found that researchers of colour are particularly vulnerable to harm, whilst Allam (2022) has noted "the special targeting of minority researchers by white supremacists". Female researchers interviewed by Gelashvili and Gagnon (2024) commented, "you face violence even if you are not the target of these discussions", whilst Mattheis (2023) notes "a special hatred of White female 'race-traitors'" (p. 599). A researcher's identity can materially change the type of harm received (Veletsianos et al. 2018), as illustrated by McMillan Cottom (2015, p. 11), who faced harassment targeting their expertise as a Black woman at a university. Autoethnographic accounts from Barlow and Awan (2016) similarly found that misogynistic and Islamophobic abuse resulted from the overlap between their identity and their research. In addition to identity, the frequency, severity and impact of harm can be affected by the researcher's seniority and their topic of research. Pearson et al. (2023) found that junior researchers were more likely to experience harm. Similarly, Brown et al. (2024) found that risk is "more pronounced" for precariously employed researchers and graduate students. Harm can be prompted by the topic of research and its relevance to the political moment, as well as the researcher's approach (Barlow and Awan 2016; McMillan Cottom n.d.; Houlden et al. 2021), even more so with the anti-intellectual moment.[7] In sum, harms are not evenly experienced.

7 As this report has been in development, attacks on institutions and researchers have increased in breadth, frequency, and severity globally. These range from the massive angry pile-on of Dr. Amelia Louks for her PhD thesis on the politics of smell (Louks, 2024) to "drastic" cuts to research funding in the United States (Glenza, 2025). In particular, reviews of US National Science Foundation grants were "keyword-driven", attempting to identify and decimate research into "DEI and "gender ideology"" among numerous other targets of the US administration (Johnson and Achenbach, 2025).

To manage these harms, researchers are largely reliant on themselves or their community. Pearson et al. (2023) found that "few institutions provided adequate formalised training, care, or support", which is echoed by Gagnon and Gelashvili (2024), who found that institutions lacked resources and procedures to support researchers, either in advance of fieldwork or having faced harm. As a result, "many researchers are forced to seek help independently" (Lakomy and Bożek 2023) and must identify mitigations and implement them without formal support. Whilst there is some advice to engage with institutions, it is often not from institutions and thus does not clearly map to available protocols or requirements (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021, p. 464). As a result, the absence of the institution as an active and engaged stakeholder "transposes ethical and employer responsibility for safe and ethical research into a poorly defined obligation for individual researchers" (ibid., p. 463). Consequently, coping strategies for researchers generally "fall within the microsystem", with a lack of support from institutions challenging researchers' abilities to engage in preventative and proactive coping (Houlden et al. 2021). Most concerningly, the current absence "could exacerbate the problem of online harassment of marginalized individuals" (ibid.). Overall, there is a reliance on individual researchers to protect themselves, which in turn challenges the effective management of harm.

Literature has attributed the absence of the institution as a stakeholder to a number of factors, namely the lack of institutional awareness and knowledge (Pearson et al. 2023; Gelashvili and Gagnon 2024; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). Mattheis and Kingdon (2021) connect this lack of awareness, in part, to institutional ethical frameworks that understand research participants as vulnerable, not the researcher (p. 460). Similarly, O'Meara et al. (2024) detail how online abuse has been "rendered unmanageable" for the institution and its staff through both its invisibility in administrative processes and the lack of suitable tools available to tackle it. In addition to a lack of awareness affecting researcher support, Pearson et al. (2023) and Gelashvili and Gagnon (2024) found that institutional ignorance

sometimes caused harm rather than mitigated it. Remedying this absence would help "shift the burden of coping off the individual" and create opportunities to protect researchers (Houlden et al. 2021).

Although this literature has significantly progressed our understanding of harm and safety, a gap remains in our understanding of whether and how the academic context (or environment) impacts researcher safety and harm management. More specifically, the academic context means managing the aforementioned risks whilst also working in an environment that produces competing demands, such as 'publish or perish', demonstrating impact and dealing with pervasive precarity. The importance of this is highlighted in particular by O'Meara et al. (2024), who argue that we should view individuals as "embedded in relationships" and "subject to broader systems and structures". Literature has highlighted how academic practices and expectations can interact with the topic in ways that create harms for researchers. Pearson et al. (2023) identified interviewees who suffered professional harms because they limited their visibility as well as those who were concerned about the consequences of institutions publicising their research. Similarly, Mattheis and Kingdon (2021, p. 460) note that implementing advice for mitigating online harassment may negatively affect a researcher's career. As a result, by mitigating one harm, researchers may inadvertently suffer another. Complicating the picture further, a range of stakeholders have an impact on researcher safety, including institutions, managers, audiences and funders. Thus, this report contributes to the literature by demonstrating how situating researchers of the far right within the academic environment can help us understand how risk and risk management is shaped not only by other stakeholders but also by broader academic norms and practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTERVIEWS

The findings of this project were drawn from 21 in-depth interviews with academics researching the far right and manosphere from a range of country contexts and disciplines. They were semi-structured (Rubin and Rubin 2012; Salmons 2015), focusing on trends such as 'publish or perish',[8] the institutional environment, risk perception and management. The interviews were designed to follow where the interviewee was comfortable going – reducing the risk of (re)traumatising the participant – and to follow potentially valuable topics raised.

The interviewees were predominantly early-career researchers (ECRs),[9] of interest because scholars have raised concerns that seniority substantially mediates researchers' perceptions and experiences of risks and pressures (Williamson et al. 2020; Carrozza 2018). Similarly, Pearson et al. (2023) found that 'junior researchers' reported the most harms. Although the majority of the interviewees were ECRs, this did not mean that they lacked experience. A number of interviewees mentioned experience researching reactionary movements at think tanks, during master's programmes or in other employed work. Alternatively, they may have gained experience from being harmed by the far right – including prior to joining academia.

Some participants mentioned identities, such as being Jewish, bisexual or working class, that they felt were relevant to their experience in academia and/or experience of harm. The majority of participants are white, which means that these findings cannot incorporate some of the key intersections of identities that mediate online harassment and experiences in academia and the digital public

8 'Publish or perish' has been defined by De Rond and Miller (2005) as "the principle according to which a faculty member's tenure is primarily a function of his or her success in publishing". This includes both the quantity of publications and the impact of the journal (Moosa 2018).

9 Those doing their PhDs and within eight years of their PhD award (not including career breaks, etc.), in line with the UK's Economic and Social Research Council's definition.

space, as noted by McMillan Cottom (2015). The participants are located in North America, Europe and Australia, meaning that the report is unable to comment on the dynamics specific to academia outside of the Global North.

It is important to note that there are elements of research on the far right and academia that may impact who participates in this type of research, with implications for what we know about risk and safety. Although the topic of researcher safety has gained visibility in the last few years, Pearson et al. (2023) note a "culture of 'macho bravado'" present in research on extremism that could discourage "honest conversation" about these issues. They detail an experience of an interviewee who had been publicly attacked by a senior scholar for talking about these issues, which could similarly discourage other researchers from talking even within a focused research setting; they also mention interviewees being concerned about seeming too emotional. Second, with disciplines holding different perceptions of risk informed by differing epistemologies (e.g. positivist or feminist), there is a need to incorporate the full breadth of research on the far right. This may particularly be the case for epistemologies that require a certain distance from the topic in pursuit of 'objectivity', with clear implications for how harm may be perceived (particularly internal harm) (Mattheis 2023; Bengtsson Meuller 2024; Tebaldi and Jereza 2024; Mondon 2024) – for instance, the difference between political science and sociology or anthropology when it comes to critical reflection on positionality and potentially its relationship to vicarious trauma. One risk of reifying objectivity is that internal harm may be reframed as a personal failing, of getting 'too close' to the research or too emotional (Allam 2022).

Similarly, whilst emotional harm is often conceptualised with an understanding that the researcher is witnessing rather than experiencing violence, this may not always hold true for those at the sharp end of the far right. As said by Rae Jereza, "it can hit differently when you're reading something that spells out your extermination" (in Allam 2022; see similar discussion in Mattheis 2023; Pearson et al. 2023; O'Meara et al. 2024, p. 6; Criezis 2022; Yadlin et al. 2024). Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) detail how race permeates

research in the social sciences, including through methods and analysis, and "challenge the artificial distinction between analysis and analysts, individuals doing research and the world of scholarly knowledge" (p. 4). Yadlin, Tsuria and Nissenbaum (2024) similarly note how researchers can be impacted by their research when the topic is "related to their own identity and culture" even if it is "not sensitive". Our understanding of what the harms are is influenced by who is contributing to the production of said knowledge, and this must remain central within the conversation. With knowledge and awareness emphasised throughout this report, a critical reflection of research on risk is necessary to highlight existing gaps.

The call for participants was circulated through four main routes: via network mailing lists such as the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism, via X (Twitter) through reposts and shares, via topic Slack channels[10] and via personal networks. Fellow scholars further disseminated the call via social media structures, such as retweeting and sharing, and via personal interactions. Often participants would refer other scholars in their network to the call for papers based on experience of harassment, ethics or trauma during research. I intentionally did not directly invite interviewees to participate with the aim of reducing the potential for distress, as participants are actively choosing to be involved in such research, and to avoid any interpersonal pressure to be involved. This approach was informed by trauma-informed research principles, which emphasise the importance of autonomy and agency for research participants (Campbell et al. 2019).

The interviewee demographics are provided in aggregate to minimise the risk of identification (Figures 1–3).

10 An instant-messaging platform structured around communities.

Figure 1: Interviewee gender

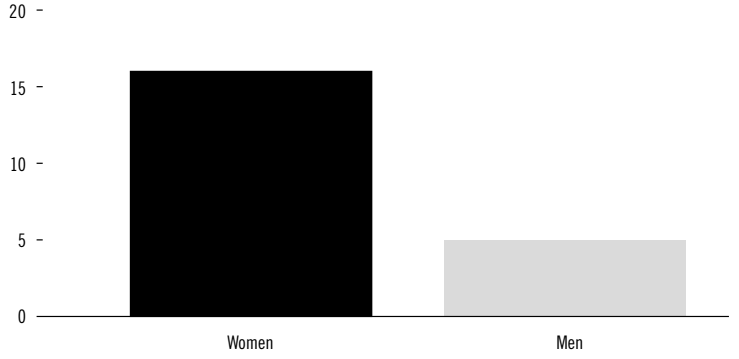


Figure 2: Interviewee institutional location

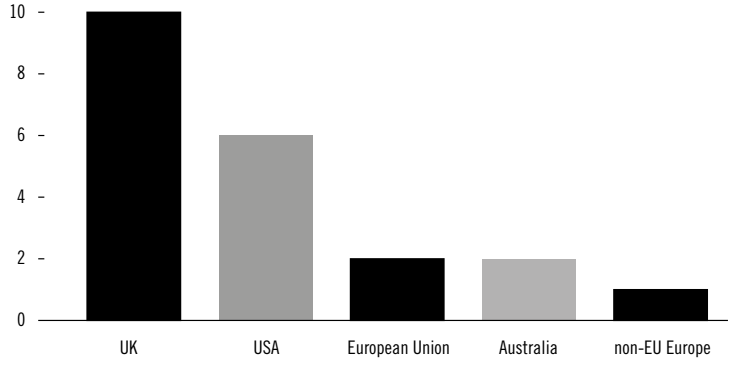
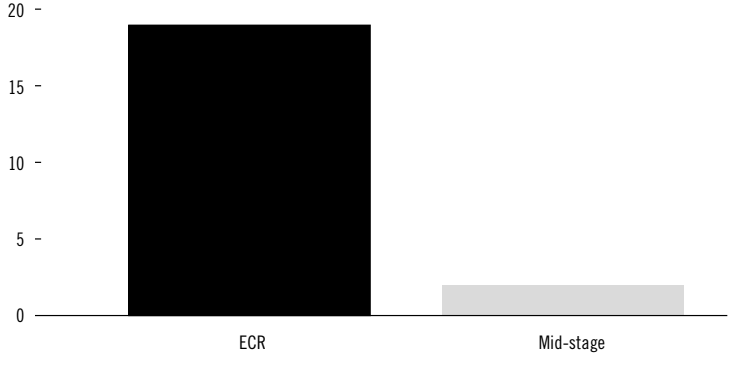


Figure 3: Interviewee career stage



The research disciplines of the interviewees included: politics; criminology; communication; philosophy; media studies; international relations; religious studies; security studies; and computer science.

The majority of the interviewees were women, perhaps reflecting more experience with harm and thus a more substantive engagement with the topic. The men interviewed were far more likely to report less or no concern about being harmed, despite several reporting experiences of harm. Additionally, as noted earlier with Pearson et al.'s (2023) observation of the 'macho' nature of the field, there is a gendered dimension to researchers discussing harm and sharing advice. Mattheis (2023, p. 593) has noted that extremism research is "still guided by attitudes from within the traditional array of disciplines at its core", which are "historically male-dominated disciplines that have tended to downplay the effects of mental and emotional harms". The majority of interviewees worked in the United Kingdom or the United States. This is most likely a reflection of my network as a researcher working in the UK. Although I sought to expand beyond my connections by sharing through networks and social media more broadly, it may not have reached researchers working in other contexts. The majority of the interviewees were in the social sciences and humanities disciplines, with a minority in computer science. Many considered themselves to be interdisciplinary.

The following list is a sample of the questions put to the interviewees as part of this research:

- What is your research focus?
- What is your approximate career stage?
- Do you have previous experience of research? Of researching the far right and/or manosphere?
- Where do you research?
- What is your discipline?
- Do you use the internet for academic purposes?

- How do you use the internet?
- Do you engage with the public sphere about your research?
- Were you offered or have you done any training related to academic use of the internet?
- What do you think of the academic approach to the internet? Do you think of it as a good or bad venue/tool?
- Do you have concerns around risk and harm related to your research topic?
- How did you become aware of these concerns?
- What guidance on risk and risk mitigation are you aware of and have you used?
- Are you taking steps to mitigate these concerns?
- Have you faced any of these risks?
- Were there any risks that you didn't expect?
- Have you engaged with your institution regarding safety?
- Have these issues affected your ambitions or expectations?
- Have you engaged with an institutional ethics process?
- What was your experience of the institutional ethics process?
- Did that have an impact on your risk mitigation strategy?
- Would you change anything if you were starting again? If yes, what?
- Would you change anything about the industry? If yes, what?

3.2 ANALYSIS

Using Clarke and Braun's (2017) reflexive thematic analysis as a framework, I analysed the transcripts using rounds of inductive and deductive coding. The data was coded as part of the whole

project, not just the specific focus of this report. Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic analysis is particularly suited to this project because it can be used to analyse "experiential concerns" within a critical framework. This helps consider how participants "think, feel, and do", asking questions about the implications of "patterns within personal or social meaning around a topic" (ibid., p. 297). It also acknowledges the role of the researcher, critical here due to my own positionality as an early-career researcher of the far right (Braun et al. 2022).

Rather than reflexivity being an add-on, as is suggested by the name, for reflexive thematic analysis, reflexivity is "*essential*" (Braun et al. 2022, p. 22, emphasis in original). This reflexivity requires a researcher to consider "their values, assumptions, expectations, choices and actions throughout the research process, and considering what these might enable, exclude and close off" (ibid., p. 22). The necessity of reflexivity comes, in part, from the constructivist underpinning of reflexive thematic analysis, as the method sees the researcher as co-creating, rather than simply extracting, the resultant knowledge. Using their guiding questions, I reflected on my position as an 'insider' in some instances (such as fellow ECR researching the far right), and an 'outsider' in other aspects (with my research experience being entirely within the UK context). They similarly directed my attention to how my positionality might have affected the data collection or range of participants and the research design by prompting questions on issues I was familiar with.

Within Clarke and Braun's (2017) thematic analysis, themes are "patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept" (p. 297) that are generated through the analysis, not shared topics. There are six phases of conducting reflexive thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, initial theme generation, reviewing and developing themes, refining and naming themes, before finally producing the report. Inductive coding took place first in order to "allocate interpretative primacy to the experiences, perspectives and so on expressed within the dataset" (Braun et al. 2022, p. 27), before using the literature to consider the data from a different analytical perspective. I coded each interview one at a time, rereading it and "assigning a code label that captures your understanding of

the meaning of a segment of the data" (ibid., p. 29). As I coded other interviews and conducted more, I revisited the initial codes, recoding when necessary. Prior to the deductive rounds of coding, I developed a set of initial codes (such as references to internal and external harms). As discussed earlier, this may bias the results to pre-existing findings but is valuable, particularly for aligning with existing frameworks. The next stage – the development of themes – is "active and interpretative" on the part of the researcher, with the end goal of each theme helping the researcher to "tell [] an overall story about the data to address the research question" (ibid., p. 31). This stage, the prior stage and the following two emphasise the necessity of flexibility when it comes to developing codes and themes and the need to approach the stages as part of an iterative process. Writing the articles and reports is part of this iterative process as the researcher seeks to tell a story accompanied by illustrative extracts.

For this project, themes included the liminal positioning of the institution, the non-guidance-based education process of the researcher, and the tension between success and safety. Literature on researcher safety, institutional risk management and dynamics in academia were used during the analysis to inform the development of the themes (e.g. Pearson et al. 2023; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021; D'Alessandro et al. 2019). In using literature to help construct the themes, the analysis may be drawn to data points which reinforce or differ from findings of other authors. To avoid prioritising certain data points over others, I did inductive rounds of coding before deductive (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 16).

Literature, the interviews and the analysis all highlighted the importance of three key stakeholders in understanding the management of researcher safety. Pearson et al. (2023) particularly highlight the individual researcher, their manager/supervisor and the institution as having particular influence. This was mirrored in the interviews conducted for this project. This trio is by no means an exhaustive list of all stakeholders with influence over researcher safety. For example, the findings make numerous references to funders and governments, both as the potential source of risk and with huge capability to mitigate harms. Second, digital actors have

a huge influence over researcher wellbeing, whether referring to users of platforms or the platforms themselves. However, I do not include these stakeholders within the analysis of stakeholders due to their diversity as well as the numerous unknowns regarding their knowledge and understanding of these harms. The impact of them, though, warrants further research.

When understanding the roles and capabilities of the different stakeholders, it became clear that there were key similarities in their positions as well as important variations within and between them. Specifically, being high in one factor did not necessarily mean that they were high in another. To capture this variation within and between stakeholders, I developed a matrix that combines the two key factors identified: knowledge and engagement. A matrix was particularly useful because a more linear representation would require me to disentangle the two factors, creating an artificial division (e.g. considering a researcher's knowledge without considering whether and how they implement that knowledge). Moreover, I chose to use one matrix for all stakeholders because it allowed me to draw connections between them whilst highlighting the specific differences through more detailed analysis.

3.3 ETHICS

Primarily, the ethical concerns relate to the participants' involvement in the project and the risk of de-anonymisation and (re)traumatisation. A number of participants shared personal anecdotes of harassment, ethical difficulties and traumatic experiences. With the report intended for the same audience that the participants were drawn from, there is a risk that an academic close to a participant, who is familiar with their experiences, might be able to recognise an individual through an anecdote or quotation. Since a number of participants spoke openly about problematic experiences with institutions, supervisors and academia in general, should a participant be de-anonymised there is the risk that they may face negative consequences in their environment. Due to this risk, and the isolated situation of some academics at institutions (i.e. being

the only researcher of the far right in their particular department/institution), the demographic data is aggregated.[11] Whilst this can prevent certain analyses, such as the contextual experience of a female researcher from a minoritised background on X continent, it protects the identities of participants. Furthermore, each quotation was checked with each participant to ensure they were comfortable with the level of anonymisation; adaptations were made in response to feedback.

Less obvious but equally harmful is the risk that someone might assume the involvement of a particular individual when the anecdote in fact belongs to someone else. This risk is not negligible and results from the numerous experiences of harassment and harm that permeate the study of the far right. Unfortunately, and whilst anonymisation procedures should hopefully mitigate this risk as well, there are few other ways to prevent these assumptions, but it could spark a discussion on quite how prevalent these issues are.

All participants are referred to via a pseudonym/moniker, for example A17 (17th academic interviewed).

11 See Saunders et al.(2014) for further detail on some of the challenges and considerations involved in anonymising transcripts.

4. HARMS

FROM THE FINDINGS of Pearson et al. (2023) and the experiences of interviewees, it is clear that researchers are vulnerable to and experience a variety of harms, varying in severity and impact. The possible impact of such harms varies dependent on the individual, with moderating factors including the identity of the researcher, their proximity to the research and their prior experiences (Conway 2021). Following Pearson et al.'s (2023) classification, this section details internal and external harms.

Some of the interviewees imagined these harms on a spectrum, with the ever-present threat or potential of worse. Whilst this acknowledges how severe some harms can be and reflects interviewees' awareness of the experiences of colleagues, it is sometimes presented as almost normalising or downplaying their own experiences as they considered them better than the worst possibility. For example, A10 stated, "I have experienced it personally, not to the extent that some people have", before later describing receiving abuse containing rape threats. The impact of these harms can be exacerbated by occurring simultaneously, as internal harm is often experienced during the course of research, whilst external harm can be experienced at any point. As a result, a researcher may be managing (or seeking to prevent) multiple independent and overlapping harms with varying requirements (Pearson et al. 2023).

4.1 INTERNAL HARM

Internal harm is defined as 'psychological or emotional issues' incorporating harms such as vicarious and direct trauma (Pearson et al. 2023). Vicarious trauma – also known as secondary trauma, moral injury or secondary stress – is defined as the "the profound and lasting emotional and psychological consequences of repeated indirect exposure to the traumatic experiences of others" (McCann and Pearlman, cited in Padmanabhanunni and Gqomfa 2022). In his discussion of vicarious trauma resulting from research on jihadist content, Winter (2019) notes that "it is easy for researchers

to dismiss as normal those behavioral changes that may indicate deeper psychological trauma" as "they can manifest in anything from a generalized loss of appetite to problems with sleeping" (p. 11).

The interviewees reflected on the emotional difficulty of the content they studied. Some described having symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, and several more described recognising emotional and behavioural impacts from consuming and analysing extreme content (mirroring findings of Pearson et al. 2023; Lakomy and Bożek 2023; and Brown et al. 2024). A14 stated that the content "started messing with my head, and I kind of started seeing ghosts everywhere". This content was particularly impactful for researchers whose identities were in close proximity to the topic, for example a Jewish researcher working on antisemitism. Moreover, researchers at the sharp end of the far right found the harm more challenging when they experienced it in both the personal and professional sphere: for example, a researcher found it harder to cope with 'everyday' misogyny whilst researching incels; a Jewish researcher expressed difficulty with antisemitic content when they were facing antisemitic abuse outside of work. Internal harm was difficult for the interviewees to identify within themselves, despite knowing that the content could cause damage, because they did not know how it presented (as noted by Winter 2019). A14 struggled to describe what internal harm was like, as "you don't realise it yourself when it's happening … when you then think back, it's like oh well yeah that was, but … like I can't even describe it in deep words, because it was such a strange subconscious – not subconscious but sublevel … I don't know, it was very strange."

The majority of interviewees used qualitative methods and did not adopt a positivist approach, being highly conscious of their positionality and relationship with the data. Several explicitly adopted a feminist epistemology. The interviewees who shared experiences of internal harm generally reported spending significantly longer with the data, with those immersed in textual and audio-visual data reporting experiences of harm. Although literature has noted a 'macho bravado' culture and its possible impact on discussing internal harm (Pearson et al. 2023; Mattheis 2023),

two of the five men interviewed recounted being deeply emotionally affected by their work and shared experiences of harm.

4.2 EXTERNAL HARM

External harm is defined by Pearson et al. (2023) as that caused by a third party, including experiences such as cyber hate, networked harassment, hostile emails, doxxing and direct messages involving death threats or sexual abuse. Some interviewees (all women) had harassment move 'offline'. A number of interviewees had experienced external harm, including severe networked harassment, sexual harassment, abuse and even death threats. The majority of those reporting experiences of external harm were women, with two of the five men reporting harassment resulting from their work. Although junior researchers are more vulnerable to harm (Pearson et al. 2023), both mid-stage researchers reported experiencing external harm. One interviewee was subjected to antisemitic abuse after harassers trawled the internet to uncover their (rarely discussed) Jewish identity. A second interviewee received abuse on their institutional email after harassers searched extensively for contact details following a blog post. A third researcher had a conference presentation (hosted on YouTube) brought down by actors maliciously utilising the report function. This abuse ranged from one-off incidents through to coordinated online campaigns. Much of this abuse followed public engagement, whether that be publishing, blogging or tweeting. The abuse most often came from the far right, even if the engagement was not about the far right (e.g. commenting on non-far-right domestic politics), because of their broader or previous work. Some abuse was sparked by publications and engagement with conferences. Many feared this type of 'offline' harm occurring, even if the risk did not always materialise. A15 shared that "for me, it's not that much of a question 'if' there will be a harassment campaign anytime in the future, but 'when'. And I feel like it's hard to see which piece of writing will trigger it because it's kind of arbitrary from what I've seen from colleagues, especially young female colleagues."

5. MATRIX

WITH THE INHERENT violence of the far right (Vaughan et al. 2024), there is an elevated risk of harm to the researcher. In light of the lack of formal guidance on the matter, recent research has aimed to explore and address the risks to the researcher through mapping the potential harms and detailing how to mitigate them (including Pearson et al. 2023, Lakomy and Bożek 2023). Efforts can operate on two key assumptions: that researchers are or can be informed, and second, that they can and will implement risk mitigations when identified.

However, the interviews reflected a more complicated picture, with varying awareness of the harms and mitigations, and second, a varying engagement with the mitigations. If a stakeholder is unaware of a risk, appropriate engagement cannot happen; conversely, if a stakeholder is aware of a risk but no action is taken (for various reasons), the risk is maintained. Considering the two in conjunction illustrates the complicated relationship between awareness and action, suggesting the need to look not only at what is not known, but also at how the available guidance can be implemented.

Complementing literature on risk management in the academic system (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021; Pearson et al. 2023), this report identified three key stakeholders: institutions, supervisors and the researchers themselves. No single stakeholder has the ability to completely mitigate risk; Mattheis and Kingdon (2021) have argued the importance of institutional involvement, with Pearson et al. (2023) also including the manager or supervisor.[12]

The knowledge and engagement of the three stakeholders are reflected here in a matrix (Table 1).

12 For a discussion of researcher welfare in non-academic organisations, see the insights from Cannon (2023) and Tech Against Terrorism (2023).

Table 1: Matrix of engagement and knowledge

	KNOWLEDGEABLE	UNKNOWLEDGEABLE
Highly engaged	Knowledgeable about the topic and highly engaged with the needs of the researcher	Unknowledgeable about the topic and highly engaged with the researcher and their needs
Disengaged	Knowledgeable about the topic, but disengaged from the needs of the researcher	Unknowledgeable about the risks and environment and disengaged from the needs of the researcher

Focusing on each actor individually allows for the analysis to accommodate the variance in responsibilities, capacity and tools available. However, the three stakeholders must be understood in relation to each other because the system is mutually interdependent and the knowledge or action of one can enhance or impede the knowledge or action of another. All stakeholders work within a system that makes certain behaviours more possible than others, materially impacting the effectiveness of efforts to improve the safety of researchers (O'Meara et al. 2024).

The matrix and combinations discussed below highlight the complex interaction between the environment and the stakeholders, illustrating key barriers to the effective mitigation of risk and improvements in the safety of researchers. Whilst this report does include a consideration of the role of individual researchers, it very much does not suggest that they are responsible for being harmed. Rather, it focuses on how individual efforts can have an impact within the system and the implications of individualising risk management (Veletsianos et al. 2018). It is important to emphasise that the field as a whole is moving away from individual resilience towards collective support and responsibility (Pruden 2024; see efforts including Alice Marwick's working group[13] with the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and REASSURE for

13 https://aoir.org/riskyresearchguide/

more examples). Fundamentally, the matrix seeks to show how 'better' – or 'worse' – decisions are guided by the system in which the stakeholders work and by the interactions between stakeholders (O'Meara et al. 2024). Considering the barriers to knowledge and engagement helps highlight key areas to improve and recentres the importance of the academic context in impacting the safety of researchers.

To reiterate, this section contends with the fine balance between recognising the agency of the researcher and acknowledging how the environment incentivises certain behaviours over others. As such, the analysis of individual behaviours is not intended as a critique or focus on what interviewees 'should' have done differently, but rather a recognition of how individuals work within a broader environment and the tools at their disposal.

The boundaries between positions are fluid, with stakeholders shifting within the matrix as they gain experience, acquire knowledge and interact with others. No stakeholder identified in the interviews represented a position perfectly, but such sketches can help illustrate some behaviours and challenges in place. Most of the interviewees represented a mixture, knowledgeable about some risks and unknowledgeable about others, engaged with some risks and disengaged from others. Later sections delve more into why researchers may know about, and engage with, some harms but not others.

This section first applies the matrix to each of the key stakeholders, briefly illustrating the different positions. It then considers how these positions work in relation to each other through six common combinations on a spectrum of effectiveness. Analysing the effectiveness of these relationships helps illuminate how the interactions between different stakeholder positions enable or mitigate harm and thus potential opportunities to improve researcher safety. Finally, barriers to knowledge and engagement are detailed, highlighting why the most effective combinations are unlikely to occur due to structural challenges.

Knowledge

The category of 'knowledge' considers the awareness of risks that each stakeholder has, including elements such as: existence, cause, likelihood, severity and exacerbating factors. It includes both awareness of the risk itself and awareness of strategies to minimise the likelihood or severity of said risk. Knowledge is not always assumed to be appropriate knowledge – for example, a stakeholder could be aware a risk exists but misinformed about the causes (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). Omniscience is not required to be deemed knowledgeable, but rather assessment is tailored to the role being considered. Knowledge is also not a fixed category – for example, PhD researchers gain significant specialist expertise through their studies, or a manager/institution may become more knowledgeable through their engagement. Finally, the category does not suggest an intentional ignorance, but instead more often reflects a lack of guidance and training, or issues with the distribution of knowledge (Pearson et al. 2023).

Engagement

The category of 'engagement' considers how stakeholders participate in risk mitigation, whether that is through engaging with knowledge acquisition (training, guidance), seeking or implementing support, or acquiring/distributing necessary resources. This category seeks to highlight the tools available to different stakeholders, and the factors involved in why stakeholders do (not) and can (not) engage in mitigating risk to its greatest extent.

5.1 STAKEHOLDER POSITIONS

5.1.1 Knowledgeable engaged

5.1.1.1 Researcher

A large proportion of the interviewees were knowledgeable and engaged, aware of the harms involved in researching the far right, and were taking a number of steps to mitigate harms that they felt were within their control. The knowledgeable engaged researcher is able to make informed decisions about engaging in activities that

may carry risk, with proactive strategies in place to minimise harm as far as possible. Risk is not entirely removed from the research, as structural harms cannot be entirely mitigated on an individual level (Veletsianos et al. 2018; Brown et al. 2024; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021), particularly due to the nature of the research. But the interviewees reported a degree of effectiveness in the measures they took. Most researchers were most knowledgeable of networked harassment and vicarious trauma and focused efforts on these two harms.

The interviewees were most knowledgeable of risks they had personally experienced or were informed of through their personal and professional networks. Knowledge often came from proximity to the research topic; several interviewees had experiences of sexist or antisemitic abuse prior to researching the far right and manosphere. Interviewees were highly aware of the impact of their positionality on their vulnerability; as A5 states, "I thought, you know, in terms of everything that incels despise is probably, it's probably me." They were highly cognisant that their proximity to the topic and the nature of the politics they research would likely lead to harm, as the material was more likely to deeply affect them and they were more likely to receive online harassment (Pearson et al. 2023; Conway 2021; Criezis 2022).

The immediate environment was a significant factor in influencing the knowledge of an interviewee (echoed by Pearson et al. 2023). Exposure to colleagues with relevant expertise (perhaps part of larger formal research groups) meant that interviewees could learn from a broader pool of experience and expertise. A10 initially was within a research group with little formal guidance, leading to the researchers leaning on each other's experience, "so that was learning as you go, and other people on the team would say 'oh this worked'. But it was basically learning from the couple of people that were doing it." Later they moved to a research group with more experience and awareness, with mandatory training on dealing with online harassment. Other interviewees were supported by colleagues with expertise, who offered recommendations. PhD students in particular benefitted from making rapid connections to colleagues facing

similar threats, already managing the risk in the same environment. There was significant heterogeneity between interviewees as to whether they were in formal research groups with access to training dependent on the country, discipline and funding model. This access significantly impacted how researchers acquired knowledge, with formal mechanisms more likely to make a researcher knowledgeable in advance of harm.

Engaged researchers sought to mitigate harms on an individual level, implementing recommendations they could find in guidance available (such as from franzke et al. 2020; Marwick et al. 2016; VOX-Pol website n.d.; King 2018). To mitigate external harm, some sought to limit their public visibility, such as through social media or engagement with public scholarship; some engaged digital cleaning services to limit information available online. To mitigate internal harm, interviewees mentioned controlling their work–life balance, including controlling time spent on analysis and avoiding work-related activities outside of working hours. Other interviewees mentioned asking for (and receiving) extensions to pieces of work, redistributing work within a team and focusing on a different topic for a period of time. Some interviewees engaged with formal mental health support, either provided by their institution or privately sought. A small number of interviewees also mentioned engaging in activism and with activists to feel like they were doing something – although this has the drawback of remaining enveloped in the topic. Guidance recommends these steps be supported by 'selective engagement', a reduction in screen time, fresh air and exercise (e.g. Williamson et al. 2020; Lakomy and Bożek 2023).

To support these efforts, interviewees often sought help outwards and upwards, from managers, institutions and their broader networks. A15 stated, "I've established my own network that knows all the tips and would back me up if anything was to happen." Networks were seen as particularly effective for mitigating both internal and external harm, as such contacts remove the power dynamic and provide access to a larger pool of knowledge and to people who understand what the interviewee is going through. Interviewees developed these networks through social media,

conferences and workshops, sometimes actively reaching out to colleagues working on similar topics to make a connection and build their network. A9 said, "I also have found that it's incredibly helpful to have kind of standing check-ins with people who also are researching the same stuff so we can chat about it together and kind of process what we've been seeing and looking at, so yeah kind of setting up those systems, you know figuring out what helps and kind of trying to implement that." In the absence of formal systems of support and training, fellow researchers provide a space to process internal harm and a source of advice to manage potential external harm.

Despite being knowledgeable and engaged, many interviewees expressed concern around suffering harm in the future as they did not feel confident their mitigations were sufficient. They thought they would find out what was needed when their mitigations are (inevitably) tested. Despite implementing many recommendations for online safety, A6 said, "I don't feel completely, completely safe … I can't know for sure if that's actually what will help me until, until something bad happens or until, you know something continues not to happen." A10 noted that they were preparing publications on the far right, "so we will see how that goes … hopefully it won't have any blowback". These researchers maintained a degree of uncertainty, likely in part because of the lack of formal training and support. The reliance on informal advice and personal networks creates a space for 'unknown unknowns', reducing the ability for researchers to implement proactive mitigations (Veletsianos et al. 2018). Furthermore, researchers' abilities to protect themselves are being further challenged by the potential removal of tools such as blocking (on X) and the increasingly hostile climate of some platforms. These researchers highlight the limits of what an individual researcher is capable of changing, even if they follow all of the recommendations (see Veletsianos et al. 2018 for more detail). These researchers also underscore the potential for positive impact that more research on this area could bring by addressing the knowledge gaps that act as a barrier to more effective mitigations or a source of concern for researchers.

5.1.1.2 Manager

Knowledgeable experienced managers such as supervisors can proactively inform the researchers of the risks they are aware of and support the researcher in implementing risk mitigations by drawing on their expertise, connections and position within the institution. They were often active in connecting the researcher with training and relevant institutional teams, such as public relations, legal or senior management, when necessary. These managers are highly effective in mitigating risk because they can catch gaps in the researcher's knowledge and help implement more substantial risk mitigations that may be out of reach for the individual researcher.

Expertise is critical to enhance the effectiveness of the support, as managers could act as an important failsafe or redundancy, providing a protective environment in which the researcher could become knowledgeable themselves (Pearson et al. 2023). Knowledgeable and engaged supervisors proved effective for protecting students in advance of harm happening. However, this was for the risks they were aware of (and it cannot be expected they are aware of all). Whilst some risk always remains, the students were less likely to find them through experience as the manager and researcher could assess risk together, considering the researcher's topic, comfort level and positionality. In the best-case scenarios, two supervisors proactively informed their students of risks such as networked harassment and drew on their network to organise relevant training. Supervisors were also instrumental in getting their students work equipment such as laptops and burner or work phones (A10). However, the number of students that had access to equipment was very minimal.

Finally, a knowledgeable engaged manager can provide support to the researcher, working to counteract some of the pressures that prove a barrier to implementing best practice such as 'publish or perish'. Interviewees reported that in general their supervisors, when engaged, were emotionally available when the work was difficult, supporting the researcher to implement stronger work–life boundaries and shifting workload where necessary (A2). This is particularly effective to help prevent internal harm and in the aftermath of experiencing either internal or external harm.

A knowledgeable engaged manager cannot catch all risks, as researchers often research a particular topic, platform or country context where the manager does not have precise expertise (and research often changes during a PhD), but it does allow for an initially supportive risk-aware environment that keeps the safety of the researcher at the forefront. Unfortunately, in my sample, only a minority of the interviewees could rely on knowledgeable engaged managers. This was often because their supervisors had a different expertise and had not received suitable training (a challenge also identified by Pearson et al. 2023).

5.1.1.3 Institution

A knowledgeable engaged institution is informed about the possible harms and what they can do as an institution to support a researcher (and their manager) to mitigate harm both proactively and reactively. This position can be incredibly effective in supporting researchers to research safely because it provides access to a much larger pool of expertise and support, acting as a safety net for any gaps in knowledge or resources.

Ideally, risks of harm can be identified in advance and the researcher can be connected with the necessary resources and training. The knowledge of the institution can be present across relevant teams, including physical security, internet security, legal, public relations, social media and ethics committees. Having proactive and established policies in place means that the researcher does not have to reinvent the wheel, but rather tailor offered resources to their particular needs and comfort levels.

Helpful policies may include allowing control over available information (contact details, office location, photo) and limiting the dissemination of information without the researcher's permission. Resources are available to researchers to be used if needed, including appropriate mental health support and assistive technology (e.g. work devices, VPNs). Such policies are ideally focused on supporting the researcher to participate as far as they choose (including in public speaking engagements). Reactive support could take effect rapidly and effectively should a threat be posed at any point, with little delay

between harm and response. Such an institutional response has the potential to minimise the impact of harm on the individual and enhance the effectiveness of individual mitigation measures taken by diffusing the responsibility for knowledge and mitigation. Moreover, this position may reduce the labour a researcher has to do to access support, a concern expressed in the literature (Pearson et al. 2023; O'Meara et al. 2024).

Some interviewees expressed concerns that a knowledgeable engaged institution may not always work to proactively support the researcher but instead act in a risk-averse manner (Doerfler et al. 2021). Rather than support, such a position could present as assessing the risk of researching the far right and manosphere to be too high and thus engage by obstructing or preventing the research from taking place in the first place (see Hedgecoe 2016, and Winter and Gundur 2022 for more detail). A3 was concerned that "if you start requesting and asking for lots of things, there is a backlash that they could be like well why are you asking for all of this stuff, what are you doing that's so, you know, problematic" (a concern also seen on the institutional side by O'Meara et al. 2024). With the resurgence of the far right, there is the risk that institutions may be increasingly averse to supporting critical research in particular, out of a concern for reputation management and to avoid the perception of curtailing 'free speech' (Pruden 2024; Veletsianos et al. 2018).

None of the interviewees identified an institution that would fall into this position.

5.1.1.4 Summary

Knowledgeable engaged stakeholders participate in the management of researcher safety from a standpoint of awareness, which in turn improves their capacity to effect or enable meaningful change. Whilst each stakeholder is unable to completely mitigate the risks of researching the far right, they are able to make changes within their capacity, the positive effects of which may compound when interacting with other stakeholders. It is of note that none of the

interviewees identified stakeholders (including themselves) that perfectly fit into this category, with stakeholders often occupying this position for some harms and not others.

5.1.2 Knowledgeable disengaged

5.1.2.1 Researcher

Some of the interviewees were closer to the knowledgeable disengaged position. Similar to the previous group, these interviewees were knowledgeable of the risks involved in such research. They were similarly aware of the recommended mitigations to minimise their vulnerability. However, they did not always consistently or fully implement the risk mitigations they were aware of despite expecting to be harmed and expressing concern about the likelihood and personal impact. Like the previous position, these interviewees were most knowledgeable of the harms they had personally experienced or witnessed, often informed by their proximity to the research subject/positionality.

Disengaged researchers may take decisions counter to best practice, such as having a social media profile, engaging in public scholarship or increasing their visibility. A18 shared that even if they made their social media account private due to anticipated harassment, they would be unlikely to maintain that for very long because of the potential impact on access and opportunities gained through engagement. Making profiles private limits researchers' abilities to organically increase their visibility and expand their network by limiting their audience to those who already are connected. Second, it reduces the audience of their work, potentially removing or reducing their ability to demonstrate 'impact'. Both A2 and A6 shared concerns that taking action (such as blocking) may precipitate rather than prevent harassment; A2 said "every action has a reaction", whilst A6 shared, "I've also been like, should I block this person but if I block them, maybe it draws more attention to it and they wonder why I blocked them and try to find some other way." Although it might appear contradictory, interviewees opted to not act as an intentional effort to mitigate potential future harm, conscious

that harassment could escalate beyond what they were experiencing. Similarly, A15 acknowledged, "I should be a lot better about it … I should be a lot more diligent when it comes to those things." For internal harm, a disengaged interviewee may have an unhealthy work–life balance, engaging with content outside of working hours, undertaking intense stretches of analysis and watching more content than is necessary for their project. A9 noticed that, when analysing content, "I've had it kind of bleed into all hours of the day and I'll kind of find myself in the evening continuing to watch this content." Disengagement may involve not engaging with counselling services or with their manager or institution for more support.

Interviewees often disengaged from best practice because they were engaging with professional demands (and could not satisfy both simultaneously), because they expected the harm to be manageable (because they had experienced it before), or because they perceived it as unable to be mitigated further. More often than not, this disengagement was informed by previous experiences of harm or in needing to tackle seemingly more urgent pressures, such as deprioritising a work–life balance in order to produce publications. A minority, including A2, did not engage with risk mitigations because of a perception that it is an inevitable result of doing the research. Finally, seeking support upwards and outwards can require significant psychological and emotional investment, as well as time, which may not be possible or palatable for researchers in all situations (reinforced on the institutional side by O'Meara et al. 2024).

Furthermore, interacting with a researcher's institution can pose professional risks, which may deter engagement. Engaging with an unknowledgeable institution poses a danger of associating the researcher or topic with a reputation of excessive, unusual or unreasonable risk (also suggested by O'Meara et al. 2024). In a risk-averse environment, this may prompt the institution to constrain the research rather than support it (also shared by those interviewed by Doerfler et al. 2021). For example, whilst some institutions were aware of networked harassment, they understood it as being prompted by the digital engagement of the researcher or the topic involved. As a result, they focused on discouraging the research

from taking place or discouraging the individual researcher's activities. Rather than receiving support, a researcher may come under greater professional pressure.

Researchers at some conservative institutions in the United States expressed concerns that raising the alarm or asking for help would be problematic because it risked producing a perception of an antagonistic researcher, which could be seen as a liability. After receiving concerning communications, A12 was reluctant to engage with their institution "because I thought I don't know how this is going to reflect on me, I actually kinda thought it would make me look bad rather than them being concerned. Like why are you bringing us this, this negative attention." Rather than seeing the institution as a potential support to improve their safety, the researcher instead was concerned that "I don't want to make this look like I don't like my job". This sentiment was echoed by A15: "well our contracts are like, three years tops, so if you cause troubles for universities they just won't prolong on your contract I don't think. Because they, there's plenty of other researchers willing to take your space that are doing less problematic work for the university" (echoed by Pruden 2024). A15 noted the power held by institutions over researchers: "I know that there were cases I think in [the European Union] where a male researcher, his university was contacted about paedophilia claims which were made up, but that would end your career before it even began, if your university doesn't have your back in the situation." These interviewees particularly highlighted the power that institutions held over careers, especially in the staff they came into contact with and the development of a reputation. The interviewees were concerned that, rather than getting support by raising awareness, instead their employment would be jeopardised or opportunities to progress thwarted. With the growth of academic capitalism, managing reputation is a key concern for institutions; as noted by Hedgecoe (2016), this can occur through risk management structures such as ethics committees. As a result of these concerns, interviewees felt discouraged from engaging with their institution.

Knowledgeable disengaged researchers are of significant concern because they often experience barriers to the implementation of

guidance/best practice. As such, educating researchers will not help make this group more effective in protecting themselves – they are already aware of some recommended steps and are unable to implement them, or 'choose' not to take them. A later section (6) details the role of professional pressures, but these researchers also point to changes that can be made in the field's research culture, balancing the need to recognise risk and moving away from the perception of unmanageable harm and the 'macho bravado' culture (Pearson et al. 2023).

5.1.2.2 Manager

Knowledgeable disengaged managers were aware of the risks associated with researching the far right (and sometimes the necessary mitigations) but did not get involved in actively training or supporting the researcher. This may be seen with managers with experience researching the far right and manosphere who may have adopted safety mitigations over time, perhaps taking them for granted. In doing so, they might unintentionally render these mitigations invisible, treating them as routine work practices. This turns risk mitigation into an invisible norm rather than something teachable. It may also be seen with managers who do not adopt mitigations themselves, possibly due to their own perception of the risk.

Whilst A13's PhD committee was aware of the topic's reputation of risk and had some overlapping expertise, this did not translate to providing practical support for the researcher. Interviewees posited that supervisors may be disengaged from supporting the student in mitigating risk because they are uninterested in mitigating the risk for themselves – they partake in risky behaviour, thus they are unconcerned with the researcher doing the same. A10's manager had direct expertise researching extremism online but did not encourage their PhD students to apply safety precautions, in part because they did not implement any mitigations themselves. Other interviewees received expressions of concern, but these same managers later joked about the harm and the interviewees' perceived naivety, with initial concern not necessarily following through to practical support.

Interviewees also critiqued a problematic idea seen within the research community that equates harm with experience, transforming harm into a credential or rite of passage rather than something that can be mitigated (Pearson et al. 2023).

Some interviewees reflected that the disengagement may be the result of perceptions that harm is embedded in the field and that harm is what researchers are signing up for – they consider this risk as part of the job, thus if a researcher wants to mitigate risk, that is a personal choice that they have no responsibility for. Whilst there is an important place for agency on the part of the researcher, this approach overlooks the role of juniority in enhancing vulnerability to harm, and particularly harm that could be otherwise mitigated. Pearson et al. (2023) found that junior researchers reported the most harms, in part because of a lack of experience.

5.1.2.3 Institution

A knowledgeable disengaged institution is aware of the possible harms and what they can do to support mitigating the risks but does not engage with the researcher or offer support. Disengagement on the part of the institution may look like failure to develop policies or training on known harms. Alternatively, a researcher may engage with a knowledgeable disengaged institution and be offered shallow, ineffective support.

Some interviewees reported that their institutions responded positively to engagement, but the expressions of support did not translate into meaningful assistance despite requests. A10 followed the institutional policy on harassment, and contacted the security department, but it was "very obvious" that they were unsure on what to do with the information, especially since the harassment did not involve physical threats (see O'Meara et al. 2024 for a consideration of why this might happen). Similarly, A12 had to independently assess the potential threat after their institution's security department simply noted the incident down. Here, the initial expression of support did not follow through to a developed policy that could be implemented when harm happened. This experience was echoed by other interviewees who received expressions of concern from

funders and institutions but no practical help. These experiences indicate a lack of knowledge on the part of the institution of how to handle such incidents and highlight the need for policies to be developed in response to harms and kept in an accessible repository/ knowledge database (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). It may also be because institutions narrowly conceive of their responsibility or capability for support, thus abnegating their role in mitigating some of the harm (O'Meara et al. 2024).

Interviewees expressed concerns that disengagement by the institution may be an active choice within the political environment. More specifically, if cyber hate is viewed as an expression of political opinion, tackling it would contravene another core value ('free speech'). As such, the institution may view taking no action as protecting that value over the researcher (who chose to engage in that research). A1 similarly suggested that whether the institution engaged with the harms or not would likely be determined by whether it fit their politics. Finally, A7 viewed their institution as unlikely to support them with cyber hate resulting from their work because of a similar lack of action taken to tackle discrimination within the institution as a whole. However, this position has ramifications for academic freedom and the feasibility of politically engaged research that is more likely to receive harassment.

The disengagement of the institution returns risk mitigation to being an individual effort, removing a number of safeguards and obstructing access to a larger pool of resources and expertise.

5.1.2.4 Summary

This position, across stakeholders, can most clearly be explained with reference to the environment in which they operate. As will be discussed in the next section (6), the barriers to researchers implementing risk management advice are informed by factors including the job market, assessments of impact and pervasive precarity. Experienced simultaneously, researchers are disincentivised from implementing best practice. Additionally, this position may be informed by a research culture that normalises harm and individualises responsibility for it, encouraging or enabling

the disengagement of the manager or institution. Institutional disengagement may also be explained by the neoliberal turn, with an emphasis on individual responsibility. This may then lead to institutional practices such as engaging with individual cases of harassment rather than developing consistent policy. As noted above, the disengagement can also be political, explained by the political environment (resurgence of the far right) or the institution's politics.

As a result, many of the barriers facing researchers could be reduced or removed through positive cultural change, including targeting incentives for an unhealthy work–life balance, tackling disincentives for engaging with the institution, and removing the expectation of being harmed in the course of research. Highlighting the institution's responsibility in addressing these challenges could encourage greater involvement (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021), whilst raising awareness of the importance of manager engagement may further support their involvement.

5.1.3 Unknowledgeable engaged

5.1.3.1 Researcher

Unknowledgeable engaged interviewees knew that there would be risks to the researcher (as a result of researching an inherently violent topic), however they did not know what shape these risks would take, the impact or how to mitigate them (also found by Lakomy and Bożek 2023; Pearson et al. 2023). A9 noted that the advice was "be aware that there might be some harassment and that was kind of scary for me because at that point I hadn't yet been harassed and didn't know what it entailed". Most interviewees were in this position to some extent, as few had comprehensive knowledge – they may have been knowledgeable about some harms but not others. This position most often represented interviewees entering the field, those conscious of the risk but unknowledgeable of the details, in the process of getting to grips with the guidance and building their networks. A9 shared, "I maybe felt slightly more knowledgeable about how to deal with it at that point but the part that neither my institution nor I were ready for – or kind of understood how

it happened – was just like the amount of vitriol that would be sent to me." Many of the interviewees transitioned from unknowledgeable to knowledgeable as they personally experienced the harms or engaged in early research, training and education (from institutions, published guidance or peers). Unknowledgeable engaged researchers often sought support and knowledge from managers, institutions and their broader network, as many were aware of some of the gaps in their knowledge.

Interviewees particularly lacked knowledge on what internal harm would feel like, how to mitigate it, or that they would be vulnerable with their methods. A14 noted, "I never thought that sitting and looking at NVivo would, would affect me." Some interviewees felt like they would not know what they needed to do to manage the harm (thus remain unknowledgeable) until they had experienced it, because they did not know how they would feel or what they would need. This is supported by findings from Lakomy and Bożek (2023), who stress the individuality of effective coping strategies.

A lack of prior knowledge meant that (regardless of engagement) interviewees often found the particular shape and type of harm through experience or observation. Some of the interviewees were unaware of networked harassment until they were harassed or of emotional harm until they were harmed, or witness to either. Other interviewees detailed learning of the possibility of attacks to reputation (such as via malicious ethics complaints through the institution and attacking the credibility of research online) and in-person harassment by experiencing it. Many of the more experienced interviewees reflected on the risks of this 'trial by fire' process; A10 noted, "my generation of researchers, we were sort of thrown in and it was learn as you go," continuing, "you can learn a lot from that, but you can also get into a lot of trouble." This process also necessitates reactive mitigations as researchers do not know what they need to protect against or the harms they might face (Veletsianos et al. 2018).

Some interviewees, particularly those newest to the field, indicated that they were unaware of pertinent guidance (such as literature on mitigating networked harassment or vicarious trauma). This suggests an issue with getting relevant material to those who need it the most. It is possibly where networks, institutions and managers can have the greatest impact by directing new starters to available materials. The knowledge gap here also underlines the importance of resource hubs such as VOX-Pol which collate available guidance.

The lack of knowledge is critical because these researchers cannot act proactively against the unknown (Veletsianos et al. 2018). Many seek out guidance and training, but it often does not happen soon enough to avoid harm or is not available (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). Furthermore, there is a dearth of suitable guidance or training, so even if a researcher actively seeks to independently educate themselves, they may not find the tools (Conway 2021; Mattheis and Kingdon 2021; Pearson et al. 2023). Whilst this is currently being rectified, for the interviewees, a lack of guidance meant that they learned of harms by being harmed, seeing it happen to someone in their network or (rarely) being informed by their network. Learning through such informal mechanisms embeds harms in the course of doing research by hindering proactive mitigations and informed decisions. Instead, safety almost becomes a matter of luck.

The lack of cohesive guidance and training has resulted in risk management becoming akin to a hidden curriculum, with researchers not knowing how they are supposed to 'behave' (research safely) until they learn as they acquire experience. With a lack of comprehensive guidance, unknown unknowns are maintained because researchers do not know where their gaps in knowledge are and thus cannot act. In general, the more experience a researcher has access to, the fewer unknowns they have, and the less likely they are to find a harm through experience.

5.1.3.2 Manager

Unknowledgeable engaged managers were unaware of risks, exacerbating factors and how to mitigate them, but supportive of researchers' efforts to educate and protect themselves. The key difference in outcome between knowledgeable and unknowledgeable engaged managers is that the former cannot act as a safety net to catch any gaps in a researcher's knowledge. This situation can happen when, for example, a supervisor takes on a PhD student whose research is not in their area of expertise or managers "who recognised that it was their job to help, but did not have the necessary institutional supports" (Pearson et al. 2023, p. 117). Unknowledgeable engaged managers could not provide a safety net or targeted support as effectively as knowledgeable managers but were crucial in facilitating access to a larger pool of resources and providing a positive working environment for the researcher, enhancing their individual mitigations. The engagement of the manager had a positive impact on both the safety and wellbeing of the researcher, particularly the former.

Due to a lack of expertise, the pool of knowledge of the researcher and manager overlaps as they are reliant on the same resources, and thus vulnerable to the same oversights. A6 recounted that at their first meeting, their supervisor had opened a Wikipedia page of 'incels' – they were learning about them at the same time the interviewee was. As a result, the interviewee could not benefit from their supervisor's guidance or expertise as they had the same experience level. Similarly, A18 noted, "I don't think [they are] necessarily aware of … what could come from working on this, on this material. And I think it's pretty much me making him aware of this" because "it's not that they are ignorant on purpose … but it's just not his research topic, so I don't think that he has much experience with these kind of things but also I don't think there was ever the need for him to find these things out."

With there being a dearth of comprehensive guidance on harms and mitigations or a centralised repository that is easily accessible to newcomers, as well as a 'bandwagon' effect leading many non-experts to flock to this particular research area (Mondon and Winter 2020), the likelihood of oversight increases. This oversight

may lead to junior researchers not benefitting from expertise gained through experience, but relying entirely on what can be gleaned from published guidance. As noted previously, the volume of this is increasing, but it won't necessarily cover every platform, methodology or technical development that may have an impact on safety.

However, even when lacking expertise, engaged managers were effective at enhancing the researcher's mitigations by connecting them with institutional resources and senior management, where necessary, to equip the student with more resources. Whilst a manager cannot directly control the provision of resources, they occupy a different position within institutional systems and the academic environment, with more political and academic capital. For example, one institution gave access to legal resources to permanent members of staff (not students), so the manager sought advice on the interviewee's behalf as they were a PhD student. A10 recounted an experience where they joined a research group that was practising "super dangerous" operational security and had to advocate a number of safety practices that were "luckily" received well and implemented. Interviewees reported that they raised concerns with their unknowledgeable engaged supervisors, who then brought in colleagues with expertise to provide training, or connected their students with individuals in their networks (A6). Here, managers supported knowledgeable researchers, providing an important facilitative role, and connected the student with institutional resources.

The ability for PhD supervisors to ameliorate their lack of knowledge may differ depending on the funding of the student. For example, those in the UK funded by Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) or Centres for Doctoral Training[14] may be able to formally bring in colleagues with expertise on researcher safety or online methods as part of a supervisory team. Conversely, self-funded students may be managed by one academic and more reliant on informal help.

14 See https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/developing-people-and-skills/esrc/doctoral-training-partnerships for more detail.

Despite lacking knowledge on the full range of risks, these managers were often cognisant of the potential emotional impact of researching the far right and manosphere. Interviewees felt able to share difficulties, ask for help and were supported in mitigating the effects (such as time off, moving to a different project) (e.g. A6). This is a critical environment to establish, as Williamson et al. (n.d.) raise concerns that ECRs may not raise issues for fear of jeopardising relationships or appearing to be troublemakers. However, as Pearson et al. (2023) point out, managers are often not trained in a therapeutic role and can struggle to support the researcher in this area.

5.1.3.3 Institution

An unknowledgeable engaged institution is unaware of the risks and risk mitigation strategies but supports the researcher when engaged with. These institutions do not have training or proactive policies in place but work with the researcher to provide requested support when necessary. Interviewees often noted that they engaged with individual teams (e.g. legal, social media, PR or security) and that there was little if any coordination between teams, leading to potential issues in communication. In some cases, interviewees were able to gain some help (such as removing public information).

However, these institutions were largely only aware of the specific harms they are directly informed of.[15] Additionally, in some cases, an unknowledgeable but engaged institution's action had jeopardised the safety of the researcher (e.g. publicising research) (also identified by Pearson et al. 2023). This gave the researcher a visibility they did not expect or were perhaps not prepared for, creating a risk that they may not have otherwise engaged with. Alternatively, this position could lead to the institution obstructing the research's progress, for example through the ethics committee. Often the first to bring these topics through the process, interviewees feared obstructive

15 See O'Meara et al. (2024) for detail on how online harassment is rendered invisible through institutional systems.

demands from committees who lacked suitable expertise rather than support (see Vaughan, 2023; Whittaker et al, 2025 among others for more detail).

A second risk is how a lack of knowledge on the part of the institution may follow through to the provision of inappropriate or unsuitable advice and support. For example, A10's team had a counsellor visit them who did not have the appropriate training for violent material and seemed visibly disturbed rather than able to offer support. Other interviewees were offered institutional mental health support, but this was the standard six- to eight-week one-off course rather than an ongoing service designed for researchers engaging with a violent subject matter. Ultimately, these interviewees did not get the support they needed through the institution, but instead had to engage privately, if they did at all. Hammett and colleagues (2022) found that a 'one size fits all' approach to mental health "fails those most at risk of harm due to their research" due to a lack of suitable support. These experiences were also observed by Pearson et al. (2023).

With an unknowledgeable institution, researchers are required to inform the institution of what the harm may be, what help or support is needed, and justify why it is necessary. Whilst this allows for tailoring and could avoid an overinvolved institution mandating unnecessary practices, it does require the researcher to be knowledgeable of the risk and what is possible for the institution, as well as absorb a cost in terms of time spent navigating often obscure committees and extra research to build the case (echoed by Doerfler et al. 2021). O'Meara et al. (2024) detail "a sense of being immobilised" amongst academic administrators when it came to responding to online harassment, as it often happens outside of institutional spaces. Operating on a case-by-case basis misses the opportunity to transform the lessons learned into a comprehensive proactive institutional policy, with associated potential to act as a safety net (Pearson et al. 2023). It also overlooks how researchers can be disincentivised from requesting more support, as noted in the section on knowledgeable disengaged researchers (5.1.2.1) (Nicholls et al. 2022).

5.1.3.4 Summary

Unknowledgeable engaged stakeholders are likely to change their position as they actively seek out knowledge. However, the extent of the change depends on their access to information, which in turn is dependent on their role and the effort invested in acquiring that knowledge. A researcher is more likely to move rapidly out of this position if the resources exist for them to draw on, whether that be written guidance or knowledge within their network. These researchers are also the most likely to benefit from help that already exists and from straightforward interventions such as raising awareness of existing resources. Said interventions may help transition stakeholders from unknowledgeable to knowledgeable before they learn through experience – an opportunity to reduce the amount of harm experienced by researchers by enabling them to make informed and proactive decisions. These stakeholders would also benefit substantially from efforts within the research community to increase the pool of knowledge on harms, mitigations implemented and existing gaps.

Targeting unknowledgeable managers or institutions is an opportunity to have positive trickle-down effects due to the potential multiplier effect. A knowledgeable and engaged manager will be able to act as a safety net for multiple students, including those who do not research the far right but may be affected by similar harms. Targeting unknowledgeable but engaged institutions creates the opportunity to develop lasting institution-wide policies and processes, acting as a safety net for researchers at all levels on a range of topics (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021). However, as discussed in the previous section (5.1.2), a more knowledgeable engaged institution may not act in the researcher's interest but instead seek to curtail or obstruct research dependent on institution risk approaches and potential concerns around reputation (Pruden 2024).

The commonality here is that the stakeholders (more often than not) transition from unknowledgeable to knowledgeable through experience. For a researcher, that's likely by experiencing the harms themselves; for a manager, that may be by supervising a researcher who is harmed; and for an institution, it is likely when they encounter

a researcher requesting help. The transition from unknowledgeable to knowledgeable through experience means that the engaged actions are reactive rather than proactive, which can be less effective (Houlden et al. 2021).

5.1.4 Unknowledgeable disengaged

5.1.4.1 Researcher

This position represents a researcher who is not aware of the risks involved in researching the far right and does not seek support or implement risk mitigation strategies. However, none of the researchers interviewed reflected this position. Conversely, many of the interviewees became involved in researching the far right because of the harm and violence that they know the far right commits and their commitment to tackling it. The lack of representation amongst the interviewees may be due to researchers self-selecting to participate in research on researcher safety, thus indicating a pre-existing interest or at least awareness.

This position could represent the researchers who are unaware of the existence of a risk and thus do not know that they should be mitigating against it – the unknown unknowns. As such, they are not purposefully disengaged, but do not implement mitigations because they do not know they have to. Lakomy and Bożek (2023, p. 20) found that "researchers with relatively limited experience in this subfield are less concerned about the adverse effects of exposure to violent extremist content or the lack of self-care training", suggesting that less concern may correlate with a lower awareness of the possible harms. These researchers will become knowledgeable in the event they experience or observe the risk, or as more guidance is created and distributed. In the meantime, they are particularly vulnerable to potential harms.

5.1.4.2 Manager

An unknowledgeable disengaged manager is unaware of the risks involved in researching the far right and manosphere and does not support the researcher in mitigating these risks. This most

often involves managers with no experience in this topic area and perhaps those that do not see an additional dimension of risk associated with the topic. This can happen, for example, when the manager hails from a different discipline and lacks knowledge of the literature in this particular area. As such, disengagement may not be active and can simply be the result of inexperience. Although A18 would turn to their supervisor if they experienced emotional distress, they perceived their supervisor to be more convinced by arguments about practicality than safety when advocating against interviewing individuals who committed hateful attacks that align with far-right ideology. As such, they appeared unknowledgeable of the risks associated with interviews and thus did not engage with mitigating them.

When there is a dynamic of unknowledgeable and disengaged, the researcher is unsupported and disconnected from institutional resources because the manager is not aware that support is needed. These managers often transition to one of the other positions as the researcher educates themselves and, in turn, the manager.

5.1.4.3 Institution

An unknowledgeable disengaged institution is unaware of the risks and possible mitigations and does not engage with the researcher in mitigating harm. For example, this may be the case with an ethics committee that lacks suitable expertise or an institution that does not require ethical review for this work (see Vaughan, 2023 for more detail). Institutions often move from this position when engaged with by the researcher or their manager. An institution's capabilities and responsibilities can vary by country. However, they remain a keystone for the safety of researchers, as they have greater economic and cultural cachet with access to a wide range of tools that could help mitigate the risks and experienced harms. Furthermore, literature has firmly argued that institutions have an obligation to tackle risks facing researchers, especially online harassment (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021; O'Meara et al. 2024; Veletsianos et al. 2018; Pearson et al. 2023; Lakomy and Bożek 2023).

5.1.4.4 Summary

Unknowledgeable disengaged stakeholders do not participate in the management of researcher safety, resulting in elevated levels of risk. The factor most likely to change first is a stakeholder's knowledge level. These stakeholders are most likely to identify harms either through experiencing or witnessing them, or, ideally, by reading about them as more guidance is produced. A researcher is most likely to change first, as they engage with material around their topic or engage in research itself. Managers may be alerted through their network, by observing it happen to a colleague or by engaging with a junior researcher who may be more informed or engaged. A change in a stakeholder's knowledge level can, in turn, impact engagement, as stakeholders become aware of risks and potential mitigations, which may motivate them to act.

5.2 IN COMBINATION

The three stakeholders have different roles with different responsibilities, resources and tools available, all functioning within a mutually interdependent system. In producing one position, an actor can materially change another actor's position, causing a cumulative impact, either positive or negative. No actor can sufficiently mitigate risk on their own, nor should they, as the combinations below demonstrate. The interviews indicated that some combinations of positions were more effective at managing researcher safety than others. Analysing these combinations helps illustrate the implications of each actor being present or absent in the process and the areas of critical failure to focus on.

Because of the sheer number of possible combinations, this discussion is not comprehensive; however, the examples chosen are both common and effectively illustrate the key implications. They also highlight areas to focus on to improve the safety of researchers and prevent future harm where possible.

Figure 4: Spectrum of effective and ineffective interactions

Disengaged unknowledgeable institution/Disengaged unknowledgeable manager/ Engaged knowledgeable researcher Disengaged unknowledgeable institution/Disengaged unknowledgeable manager/ Disengaged knowledgeable researcher	Engaged unknowledgeable institution/Engaged unknowledgeable manager/ Engaged knowledgeable researcher Disengaged unknowledgeable institution or manager/ Engaged knowledgeable researcher	Engaged knowledgeable institution/Engaged knowledgeable manager/ Engaged knowledgeable researcher Engaged unknowledgeable institution/Engaged knowledgeable manager/ Engaged knowledgeable researcher

5.2.1 Effective

5.2.1.1 Engaged knowledgeable institution | Engaged knowledgeable manager | Engaged unknowledgeable researcher

This dynamic is one of the most effective because it creates a safety net for the researcher and adds multiple safeguards to the process. Here, the safety of the researcher is not simply reliant on experience or knowledge that they may not have, but instead the risk can be assessed and mitigations implemented proactively if needed whilst the researcher develops their understanding of their topic. Institutions and managers have access to a larger pool of resources and expertise to support the researcher, allowing knowledge to trickle down, as noted by Pearson et al. (2023). The effectiveness of this combination is reliant on the researcher remaining at the core of the process, with training and resources tailored to their precise requirements, rather than blanket inflexible policies being mandated (a concern also raised by Lakomy and Bożek 2023).

5.2.1.2 Engaged unknowledgeable institution | Engaged knowledgeable manager | Engaged knowledgeable researcher

This is a very effective combination because those closest to the research are the most involved in managing risk. Like the previous combination, this dynamic broadens the pool of knowledge, making it less likely that a risk is overlooked and, should it occur, it is likely to be addressed more effectively and in a swifter manner. It also leverages both the specific expertise and requirements of the researcher with the experience and seniority of the manager, creating a safety net for independent research. These two stakeholders can then in turn make the institution knowledgeable, facilitated by an institution being open to providing support. The interviewees highlighted how a positive relationship between them and their managers was the most significant for creating an environment where safety was a priority and mutual concern. A3 shared, "I have a really fantastic relationship with my supervisor and so that if anything ever happened then I always immediately email [them] ... I think your relationship with your supervisors is really important for protecting yourself and getting you through the tough times." However, as noted previously, there remains a risk that an engaged institution challenges rather than supports critical research.

5.2.2 Somewhat Effective

5.2.2.1 Engaged unknowledgeable institution | Engaged unknowledgeable manager | Engaged knowledgeable researcher

This combination is reasonably effective and very common. Here, the safety of the researcher is reliant on them educating upwards. It can increase the researcher's safety because the stakeholders with more resources and seniority are open to providing support, shifting risk management from an individual to cooperative effort. However, since two stakeholders lack knowledge, if the researcher is not aware of a risk, it is likely to be overlooked, removing the possible safeguards in the system. The effectiveness of the dynamic reduces with the knowledge of the researcher, making their education of utmost concern. This combination has the greatest

opportunity to create change, although it is reliant on the researcher being able to seek support and those requests being received positively and not antagonistically.

5.2.2.2 Disengaged unknowledgeable institution or manager | Engaged knowledgeable researcher

If either the manager or the institution is disengaged and unknowledgeable, the effectiveness of the previous dynamic is significantly weakened. An unknowledgeable disengaged stakeholder removes access to the resources associated with their role or remit. Similar challenges are present, including the potential for risks to be overlooked and a lack of safeguards in the system. Many of the interviewees did not know what help to request or what was possible from the institution because they were ECRs and unfamiliar with many institutional processes. With researchers often learning what they need when they have been harmed, interviewees found the prospect of investing time to educate upwards as they were tackling the harm to be an unwelcome prospect. However, the other two stakeholders, if engaged and knowledgeable, can prompt the third to become engaged, knowledgeable or both. If the manager is knowledgeable and engaged in this dynamic, it is more effective because they are more likely to have relevant expertise and are more involved with the researcher. However, in a risk-averse institutional environment, ECRs could be disincentivised from requesting help as it spotlights their research as riskier, with some fearing that they will be seen as troublemakers. The disincentives associated with asking for help highlight that a system reliant on the researcher risks the researcher not asking for help at all.

5.2.3 Ineffective

5.2.3.1 Disengaged unknowledgeable institution | Disengaged unknowledgeable manager | Engaged knowledgeable researcher

This combination is ineffective because it isolates the researcher as the sole stakeholder involved in risk management. Houlden et al. (2021) note that a lack of support by other stakeholders means that

"an individual will have little choice but to adopt individualized or microsystemic coping strategies". Any risks they are not aware of are likely to be overlooked, with resources limited to those they actively request (and are thus knowledgeable of). This dynamic is more effective if the researcher is able to educate and advocate upwards, changing the positions of other stakeholders. However, interviewees reported this could be an uncomfortable and potentially risky route as it could open them up to backlash or unanticipated professional consequences (O'Meara et al. 2024; Pearson et al. 2023). Observed disengagement by the institution may prompt other researchers to avoid seeking support. One interviewee noted that witnessing a colleague's lack of support made them reluctant to seek help themselves. A lack of support can have substantial consequences, with Lakomy and Bożek (2023) noting that some junior researchers have left academia as a result.

With the researcher as the sole stakeholder, they must navigate pressures that disincentivise safe behaviour (see section 5.1.2.1 for a full consideration). In this combination, a researcher is able to protect themselves to some extent. However, they remain vulnerable because the harms are structural, endemic and unable to be mitigated by the individual alone. This is reinforced by Veletsianos et al. (2018), who argue that "self-protection will not solve the problem" and note that the work to mitigate or respond to the harms may cause professional harm. Moreover, few interviewees had a comprehensive knowledge of the risks and mitigations, likely due to a dearth of guidance and training (Pearson et al. 2023). Any gaps in knowledge create the potential for harm as the researcher responds to professional demands without the knowledge to make proactive and informed choices. Interviewees new to the field reported experiencing harm early in their research because they were not aware of the risk involved in core academic activities, and received encouragement (or pressure) to dive in.

For the risks the researcher does not know of, they are likely to discover them through experiencing them. In some cases, unknowledgeable supervisors encouraged inexperienced interviewees to engage in (potentially risky) work without training

or expertise because of the potential for valuable data. A10 reflected on the security practices of other students that they observed: "there were some people … that were doing stuff that I look back on now and think 'oh my gosh that was really dangerous' … someone should've thought this through a lot better." At times, interviewees pushed back based on safety concerns, but if they were not aware of the risk, they followed the encouragement and were harmed. Whilst trial and error is a core part of a PhD, it can also embed harm; with this topic in this environment, an 'error' can result in harm not just a learning opportunity.

5.2.3.2 Disengaged unknowledgeable institution | Disengaged unknowledgeable manager | Disengaged knowledgeable researcher

The least effective combination is arguably one where all stakeholders are disengaged from managing the safety of the researcher, including the researcher themselves. The disengagement of all stakeholders means that few – if any – mitigations are in place and the researcher is likely to be harmed. The disengagement of the researcher can be in spite of their knowledge and highlights how the implementation of best practice may be disincentivised or constrained by the academic environment.

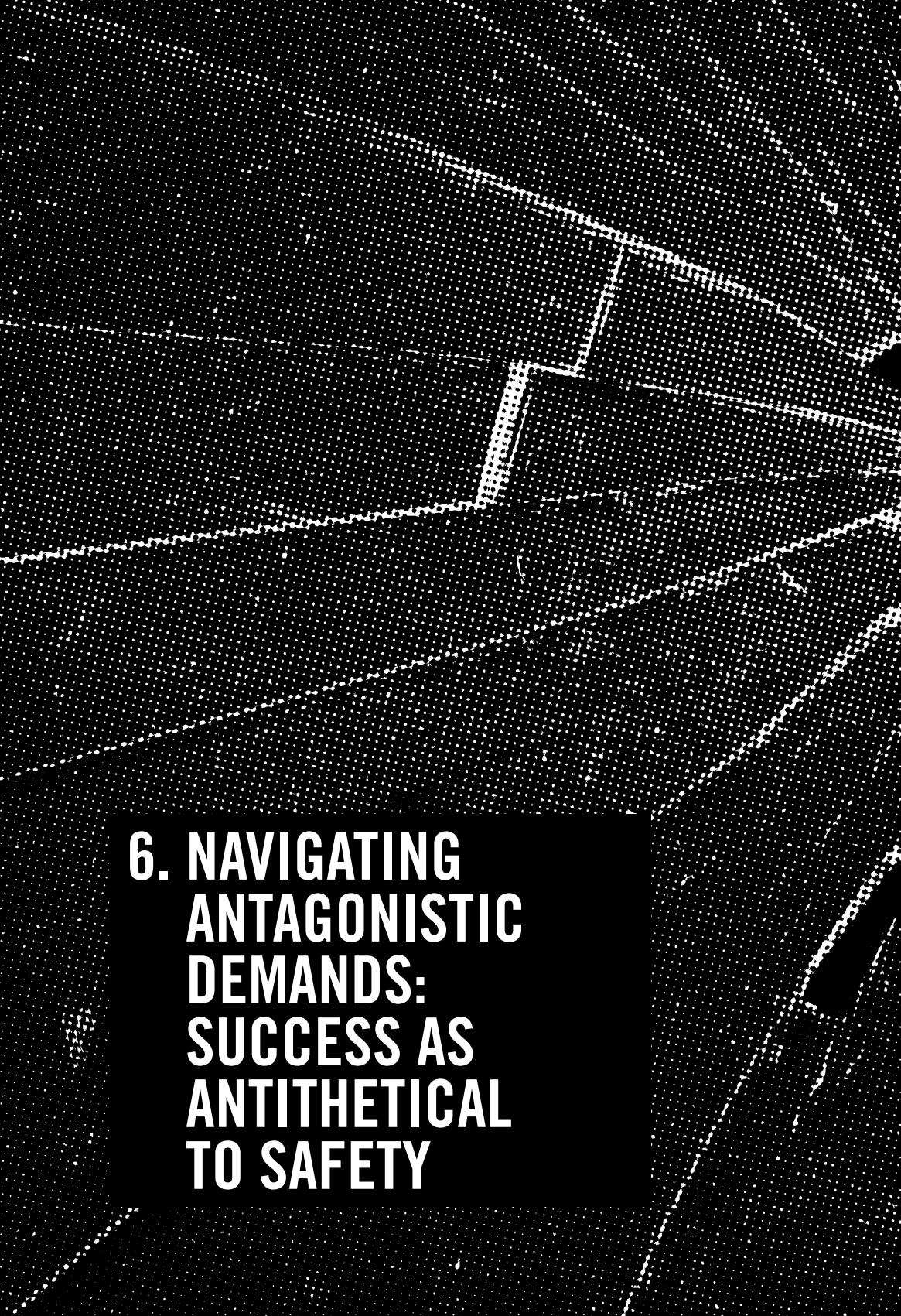
5.3 SUMMARY

The matrix has illustrated the complex interactions between knowledge and engagement, highlighting that the need for more than informed researchers and more than 'good' behaviour. In particular, the interactions between the stakeholders represent opportunities to increase the number of safeguards and improve structural resilience, moving away from single points of failure.

Whilst a lack of knowledge across stakeholders is a key issue (that is being rectified by the community), getting that knowledge to where it is needed most is a greater challenge. Similarly, whilst guidance on best practice is very much needed, we must look beyond information to see how it can or cannot be implemented. Many of the barriers

highlighted represent areas that need cultural change, reconceiving what is a risk, who is responsible, and the possibilities for tackling said risks.

As it is, risk management is largely an individual endeavour, overly reliant on the actions of individual researchers who are often poorly equipped and/or unable to assess and manage risk at the individual level (echoed by literature, including Pearson et al. 2023; Veletsianos et al. 2018). The next section considers how this approach in the academic environment embeds perishing: either through 'failure' or harm.



6. NAVIGATING ANTAGONISTIC DEMANDS: SUCCESS AS ANTITHETICAL TO SAFETY

AS DISCUSSED, RISK mitigation is largely an individual effort, with researchers implementing safety advice such as limiting visibility and exposure to violent content (Veletsianos et al. 2018; Pearson et al. 2023; Doerfler et al. 2021). These are required by the harm associated with such research (and, in general, the online environment). However, working in the academic environment requires adherence to certain expectations to develop one's profile, maintain position and progress in one's career. This section details how researchers' abilities to mitigate harm can be undermined by an environment that creates an antagonism between success and safety. In effect, the behaviours required for success reframe harm mitigations as negative, disincentivising or constraining researchers in protecting themselves. As a result, researchers must navigate a tension, disproportionately affecting those researching at the sharp end of the far right. Exacerbating this issue, academia can actively create or encourage risks for the individual, further embedding harm in the course of research.

Observed by A5, rather than focusing on risk mitigation, "in academia, you're driven by other considerations." Success is predicated on productivity and increasingly visibility, with focus on publications, impact and accumulating social capital (Hamann 2018; Geuna and Martin 2003). This section considers how researchers face professional harm, penalising progression, as a result of managing risk (Pearson et al. 2023). It echoes the findings of Pearson et al. (2023), who similarly note the contradictory nature of visibility and safety. Conceptualising it as "professional harm", their report details experiences of interviewees who experienced career detriments whilst mitigating internal and external harm. Additionally, Veletsianos et al. (2018) found that coping mechanisms for online harassment had "far-reaching consequences", and Lakomy and Bożek (2023) note that implementing mitigations for vicarious trauma "may backfire and impede many scientific careers". This section details how an antagonism is formed between success and safety and posits that the environment embeds harm through this antagonism by requiring researchers to choose between opposing poles.

6.1 NAVIGATING VISIBILITY AND OBSCURITY: CHALLENGES MANAGING EXTERNAL HARM

One of the most efficient ways to mitigate cyber hate is obscurity, particularly controlling engagement with the (digital) public sphere (Doerfler et al. 2021; Marwick et al. 2016). This is because cyber hate is often facilitated by more visible profiles, which increases the chance of coming to the attention of hostile actors (Doerfler et al. 2021). Interviewees saw the risk partially correlating with the size of their public presence, including through publications. This public presence may involve their social media profile, engagement in public scholarship or journal articles. The majority of interviewees engaged in some form of visibility limitation, primarily focusing on the non-academic public sphere, such as publicly accessible reports, blog posts, media articles and social media. With more risk perceived from blog posts because of their more accessible nature and intended public audience, interviewees leaned towards publishing journal articles, feeling some degree of protection from paywalls and a perceived academic walled garden. A5 shared this preference because "there is that maybe a little bit of protection, you kind of think that if you're going to put this material out, that you could do it within the academic silo, hidden behind the academic paywalls." For these interviewees, being conscious of the location's attributes (audience, accessibility) and making decisions accordingly was a safety precaution. Others avoided blogging on certain topics they researched, evaluating the risk to outweigh the benefit. One interviewee explicitly sought to limit the distribution of a report. Some interviewees self-censored, concealing the specifics of the research (names of groups, etc.), whilst others sought to use deliberately 'non-provocative' language.

Whilst limiting visibility provides some protection, it can impact on career prospects and progression by specifically going against the widespread demands to increase the visibility of research and demonstrate expertise widely. A5 suggested that to have "that externally recognised reputation, and social media is a huge part of [success] today", to the point that disengagement "might be

questioned". The impact on career progression is recognised by interviewees that make these decisions; A7 noted, "I do think there are some opportunities that are not available to me, or I would be more hesitant to take because of who I am and how my online safety is impacted by that." This often seems like an impossible choice: "I feel like, because I'm having to be a bit more cautious and a bit more anonymous than I would want to, then I'm not going to have the same exposure and career opportunities as other people." These decisions become necessary as researchers generally lack institutional support to mitigate risks, forcing them to rely on personal strategies for protection. However, these mitigations also have the unintended consequence of damaging their careers.

Limiting engagement with the non-academic sphere did not remove the potential for harm entirely. Interviewees detailed risks associated with unavoidable core parts of the job (e.g. conferences, journal articles). Interviewees shared concerns around publishing journal articles, coming from knowledge that communities they researched were aware of output about them and circulated academic articles. One interviewee mentioned that harassment on 4chan was almost guaranteed post-publication due to previous attention paid to their research group. Although journal articles were somewhat seen as something of a walled garden with a price associated with access, the digitalisation of journal articles and the push for open access has materially changed the risk profile associated with publishing. Similarly, whilst it was more common during the Covid-19 pandemic, an interviewee had a conference presentation hosted online removed after hostile actors maliciously weaponised the report function. As such, anxieties peaked around these outputs because interviewees saw few (if any) ways of mitigating the risk of harm.

Some visibility may be mandated by the institution and closely associated with the academic environment – for example, institutional digital profiles or knowledge exchange required by funded projects. One interviewee faced pushback from a funder who did not understand their safety concerns and challenged their request to limit the audience of a report. Institutional profiles can offer sufficient information to spark harassment by associating

a researcher with their subject expertise and providing contact information. Mandated visibility can pose a challenge to certain methodologies; A5 commented: "institutions … want their members of staff to have that really visible profile … so if you were trying to do covert research, a lot of the time … the topics might already be linked to you from [staff website, staff webpages]." Even if it is possible, a decision to remove this profile is a double-edged sword when considering the potential impact on their career. Here, rather than helping researchers to mitigate potential harms, institutions exacerbated their vulnerability.

Beyond the indirect impact on reputation from obscurity, researchers of the far right also face efforts from the far right to harm their reputation, with the institution used as an attack vector. Three interviewees mentioned harassment directly focused on undermining their credibility, ethics, expertise and quality of research. Two had (or knew of) the weaponisation of the institutional complaints process, where baseless ethics complaints were made (and investigated by the institution) to put the researcher under pressure. Another had harassers write to the institution challenging their expertise and the institution's decision to hire them. Another interviewee feared a job offer could be rescinded because trolls harangued their institution. Some of these interviewees were unable to get peer support because they had withdrawn from the public sphere to protect themselves in the first place. These experiences created high levels of anxiety as they created a threat to the researchers' reputation and their standing at their institution at a precarious stage of their career. Pearson et al. (2023) similarly found that online harassment could cause reputational damage and that "those with the least professional status and power … felt most at risk of professional harm" (p. 42).

The safety of obscurity and the reward for visibility requires researchers to achieve a difficult balancing act fraught with tension and risk. This was described by A13 as a "tightrope walk". A5 (and A10 using very similar language) identified it as a "catch-22", where "obviously, I need to be easily discoverable as a cyber researcher, but then at the same time, because this is what I'm researching, then it puts me at extra risk." A9 noted that, as an ECR, they found

it "very exciting … to be like 'oh my research is getting attention' but also it was through that reporting, that's how kind of the far right ended up finding the research." Without recourse to institutional resources and support, the benefits and drawbacks of public engagement are shouldered by the researcher, thus they must be the one to make the choice. A5 mentioned doing an informal internal cost–benefit analysis for public engagement – whether the benefit to their career would outweigh the possible risks.

This balancing act is particularly difficult for researchers at the sharp end of the far right. It is well documented that marginalised scholars receive disproportionately more cyber hate (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Veletsianos et al. 2018), but they also have to work harder to meet the same success metrics, making the two poles further apart and each decision more loaded (Settles et al. 2021). A7 noted, "I can't help but think that someone who wasn't Jewish or someone who wasn't a woman wouldn't have to think about this," and detailed frustration at how some researchers are able to amass X (Twitter) followings (with the associated opportunities) and participate in public scholarship opportunities because they have less vulnerability.

Whilst senior researchers with larger public profiles may attract more attention from hostile actors, interviewees viewed early-career researchers as more vulnerable, as they often lack the institutional and reputational standing that offers some protection within both the institution and the broader academic environment. Professors subject to attacks to credibility would have their body of work and reputation to rely on; similarly, if they needed to withdraw from the public sphere, they often already had secure employment. Conversely, early-career researchers are more reliant on developing a reputation and producing quality and impactful work in order to progress and/or secure employment. In an environment of pervasive precarity, the need to develop a reputation and accrue social capital becomes existential for their desired future. At the same time, threats to credibility are more damaging.

6.2 NAVIGATING PRODUCTIVITY AND EXPOSURE: CHALLENGES MANAGING INTERNAL HARM

Although best practice recommends that researchers limit exposure to content, interviewees felt a "haunting" pressure to produce research and thus work more, not less (A2). In particular, interviewees found healthy practices were disincentivised by metrics that reward productivity and output. The emphasis on productivity is problematic because it increases the amount of exposure whilst reducing the ability of researchers to portion out said exposure. During times of harm, violence becomes data, making disengagement problematic. A Jewish participant mentioned the difficulty of switching off, feeling like times of hate were when they should be working more (A7). Similarly, A6 and A13 felt some pressure to contribute because of the prevalence of inaccurate or even damaging analysis.

Whilst participants felt like they could *ask* for time off, they often felt like they could not *take* it (A2, A6). ECRs can be particularly affected by time pressure because PhDs are often time-limited and focused on one topic, which limited the interviewee's ability to either achieve balance or switch focus (Hazell et al. 2020). As (often) the sole researcher on a PhD, time off brings research to a standstill, creating fear that completion is jeopardised. Participants recounted the pressure to 'get through' analysis 'no matter what', as well as feeling such intense pressure from the need to produce that they 'pushed through' emotional difficulties. A6 perceived time off as incompatible with their research demands: "I don't know how that would work if I really needed to take like a month away or something, that would really seriously put a dent in my research. I don't know how I could manage that." Similarly, A13 felt unable to take time off: "If I do it, it's always with a lot of guilt and always being way behind when I, even if I take one [day]." A13 sacrificed attending therapy because of the time pressure from their dissertation. Interviewees could implement neither proactive nor reactive care as mitigations are reliant on time and balance. Williamson et al. (2020) recognise that there can be conflict between "the demands of the project and the emotional needs of the team", finding that a supportive team made

a substantial difference in their ability to manage both. Often as lone researchers, PhD students may face higher barriers to implementing healthy working practices, especially those involving disengaging from work. This again can exacerbate inequalities in academia (Pearson et al. 2023).

In general, interviewees opted to mitigate harm to their professional prospects by not mitigating harm to themselves, with substantial implications for their wellbeing. A number of participants recounted realising they were affected once the research project was complete (A13, A14). Interviewees were unable to recognise the damage in the midst of the research because they did not have the time to disengage, and even when they recognised the harm, they could not stop work, instead shifting to work on another part of the project (A2, A14). Although a number of interviewees had experienced emotional harm, they felt unable to prevent it in the future because they felt it was incompatible with the productivity required to remain in academia. A9 was one of the only interviewees who had implemented mitigations; after a period of substantially heavy workload, A9 had to put in "guardrails" such as a work–life balance because they noticed that their mental and emotional health was substantially impacted. They were only able to do this because they felt they had produced a sufficient number of publications to shoulder the cost of reduced productivity.

6.3 FINANCIAL COMPLICATIONS

The pervasive precarity and financial insecurity of academia limited researchers' abilities to purchase (and thus implement) best practice. Many of the interviewees were precariously employed or PhD students on limited budgets. Financial insecurity can require PhD students to maintain part-time jobs alongside research, further challenging their ability to disengage from work. A6 stated, "I definitely can't take all the precautions that are recommended because I'm on a budget." Some interviewees compromised on implementing comprehensive mitigations due to cost, for example by opting for free tiers rather than paid-for services. Precautions

with a price tag include having separate work devices, VPNs, password managers and private counselling. Some interviewees implemented paid-for tools in spite of the cost because they felt like they had to: "yeah I paid for it, yeah I put it on my credit card, like we do when we're PhD students, you know" (A13). A11 applied for grants specifically to pay for the recommended security protocols, but the financial cost associated with mental health support to mitigate internal harm proved a challenge to absorb. These mitigations fall within what Cantwell-Chavez and Rowland (2022) have described as the 'hidden costs' of graduate school programmes – unexpected expenses that are not necessarily covered by funding. These costs exacerbate the financial pressures of graduate school, which are known to have an impact on wellbeing, possibly transmuting rather than reducing stress (Schmidt and Hansson 2018).

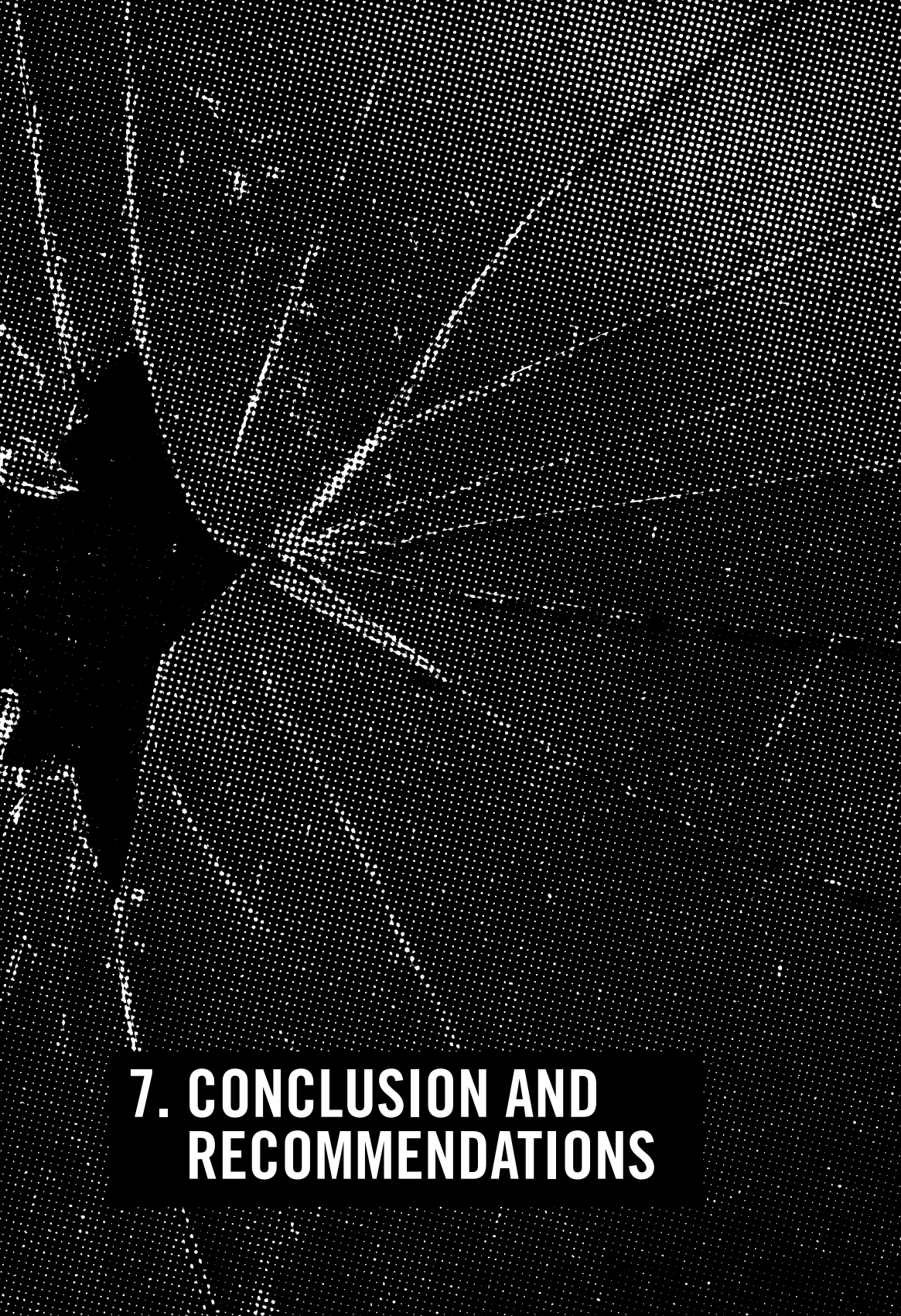
6.4 ACADEMIC DEMANDS AS CONSTRAINTS ON SAFETY

Success metrics in academia evaluate visibility and productivity; safety requires obscurity and balance. The behaviours required for each are broadly contradictory, with the individual researcher shouldering the benefits and costs. As a result, each researcher must choose how to navigate the two opposing poles. Responsibility for risk management and engagement with these trends is individualised to the researcher, even as the structures of academia embed risk as a necessary part of success. This individualisation means that researchers cannot engage with knowledge exchange and research with the intention of contributing to tackling the far right, but rather as part of a complex high-stakes risk management strategy. Whilst researchers of the far right do not experience particularly unique threats (as seen with online harassment towards feminists, climate change scholars, gaming scholars: Massanari 2018; Marwick 2020; Veletsianos et al. 2018; Doerfler et al. 2021), they highlight how risks to the researcher can be exacerbated by the environment.

Those who did choose to limit their engagement with these elements acknowledged the likelihood that their success within academia will be limited but found it necessary for mental and

emotional health. They made these decisions with the perception that harms such as online harassment were near inevitable, often as a result of previous experiences and positionality. With mental health provision often underfunded at institutions and proactive practices disincentivised, internal harm is increasingly embedded in the conduct of this research. Those who did engage with success metrics managed their vulnerability carefully, weighing up each engagement. However, even if scholars completely disengage from the digital public sphere, a substantial risk is posed by core academic activities such as conferences and publications. Complicating the implementation of best practice, financial and contract precarity constrained researchers' abilities to purchase necessary mitigations. Also constraining scholars were country-context-related legal requirements affecting the publication of information and financial precarity.

Ultimately, harm comes from the antagonism created between success and safety. This antagonism illustrates how a researcher's agency to manage risk is constrained by an environment that incentivises certain behaviours over others whilst individualising the consequences. Researchers are unable to choose how they engage with research and impact because each decision has a requirement to perish: either through 'failure' or harm. The contradictions are problematic not least because healthy working practices and knowledge exchange should be things to strive towards rather than disincentivised or framed as an impediment to success or safety. With satisfying metrics a requirement to continue in academia, self-preservation becomes less of a 'choice'. Individualising the response to harassment leaves the digital public sphere accessible only to those either willing to 'put up with' abuse and harassment, or identities who receive less abuse and harassment and thus can make the choice to participate (echoed by Veletsianos et al. 2018).



7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

USING INTERVIEWS WITH 21 (predominantly early-career) researchers of the far right and manosphere, this report details how risk and harm is managed within the academic system when researching an inherently violent topic. Reinforcing the need to move away from emphasising individual resilience, it highlights how environmental factors have a significant impact on the ability of scholars to research safely. Whilst stakeholders often engaged with risk management in a constructive manner, numerous challenges emerged, particularly in the process of risk education and how the system can disincentivise 'good' behaviour by creating a tension between success and safety. Critically, this report argues that, rather than focusing solely on knowledge, we must also consider how best practice can be implemented by the researchers it is meant to help.

To understand and illustrate the varying experiences and positions of stakeholders, the report introduces a matrix to show how knowledge of, and engagement with, risk impacts on the effectiveness of risk management. This matrix is fluid, recognising the complex effect of interactions and the ability of each stakeholder to learn and engage. In sum, there are a number of key areas where improvements can be made across all stakeholders that offer the opportunities to significantly increase the safety of researchers and the effectiveness of both management and institutional processes. Significantly, the current system has no slack or structural resilience, relying instead on single points of failure – most often the researcher. Many of these challenges originate from existing systems or ways of doing, whether that be the neoliberal ethos that underpins the management of research, the liminal positioning of PhD students, or the knowledge gained from learning through experience. Whilst elements of these approaches hold value, the experiences of the interviewees highlight how they can have serious implications when researching an inherently violent topic.

Whilst many of the interviewees relayed experiences of harm, they were broadly hopeful for the future, especially with regard to the visibility of the topic and the effort directed towards addressing the challenges. A10 noted that whilst they experienced a "trial by fire", the next generation of researchers was benefitting from the lessons

learned and the distributed knowledge. A3 recently informed me that money for mental health was now built into funded PhD programmes at their institution, and that their ethics process had broadened their remit to include online harms – both positive developments. Many of the scholars interviewed were looking to contribute themselves, whether through community engagement, supervisory relationships or producing literature on the topic. However, beyond community efforts, we must also engage with key stakeholders to change the critical components beyond the individual's control to have a substantial impact on the safety of researchers and construct a safety net that is not reliant on any single point of failure, or an individual's 'good' behaviour.

The findings of this report point to both practical and aspirational recommendations to improve the safety of researchers (especially those researching at the sharp end of the far right and early-career researchers), reflecting that there is more we can do as a research community whilst also highlighting the areas of the system that require cultural change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Individual

- Reach out to networks (both formal, such as the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism or Far Right Analysis Network, and peers).
- Engage with a risk assessment framework to assess personal risk and potential areas of harm:
    - Assess potential sources of risk.
    - Assess potential mitigations, including what is needed from other stakeholders, for example funding, removal of information, technology, and so on.
- Explicitly discuss your ethical approach to research, including safety recommendations implemented.

- Plan and aim to implement healthy working practices, such as working hours, regular breaks, annual leave.
- Identify alternative work plans to use if you need a break from primary data collection or analysis.
- Identify healthy coping mechanisms, such as hobbies or an exercise routine, that work for you.
- Identify potential grants to acquire funding for safety mitigations, for example work devices, VPNs, mental health support.
- Discuss a plan for dissemination and engagement with supervisor and peers, including potential sources of risk and potential mitigations.
- Regularly review online presence, including institutional and social media profiles.
- Develop a plan for use in case of experiencing harm (internal and external).
- If suitable, discuss risks and potential mitigations with managers and institutions in advance of commencing research or experiencing harm.

Supervisor/Manager

- Leverage your position and your network to connect students with relevant resources, for example institutional legal team, formal networks, grants, colleagues with expertise in the fieldwork site or topic:
    - If supervising a student in a UK Doctoral Training Partnership, consider bringing into the supervisory team a colleague with methodological or ethical expertise.
- Proactively discuss risk and harm with students, identifying potential sources of harm and relevant resources:

    - Adopt an identity-conscious approach to risk.
    - Consider potential mitigations and stakeholders who could support acquiring these, for example institutions, grants.
    - Consider risk and harm in each stage: scoping, data collection, analysis, publication and engagement.
    - If at an institution without an ethical review system, discuss the ethics of the research with the student.
    - Engage in reflection and discussion repeatedly, not just at the outset of the project.
- Establish and encourage a positive culture, with sufficient leave, breaks from data collection and analysis, and a work–life balance.
- Lobby for sufficient training from institutions for supervisors and researchers.
- Encourage and establish a culture change, moving away from understanding harm as inherent in the work.
- Re-evaluate expected timelines for researchers working on harmful topics, building in necessary breaks, the potential for time off or temporarily switching to a different task.
- Senior researchers should prioritise educating themselves on the potential harms involved in the research they are conducting, particularly when supervising junior researchers who are directly engaged in these aspects.
- Ensure that junior researchers employed on a project are given sufficient training on harms and how to mitigate them, and access to the necessary tools.
- Build funding for safety mitigations for all members into research grant proposals, for example mental health support, VPNs.
- Proactively monitor for signs of stress, burnout and vicarious trauma, and signpost relevant resources.

Institution

- Institute broad and mandatory training for researchers on topics including internal and external harm, as well as potential mitigations and available support.
- Develop and deliver training to relevant departments on harms facing researchers and how each department can support identifying and mitigating them, for example physical security, IT security, public relations.
- Create clear pathways and processes for researchers and supervisors to engage with relevant teams in the event of harm, or prior to commencing research.
- Develop protocols for safe online research and harms and make them available to researchers and supervisors.
- Develop institutional protocols for how to respond to harms, including online harassment and vicarious trauma:
    - Within this, develop an institutional response to attacks to researchers' credibility and professional reputations, including public and private components.
    - See, for example, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences' (KNAW) National Platform for Threatened Academics (WetenschapsVeilig), https://www.knaw.nl/en/news/launch-national-platform-threatened-academics.
- Incorporate a consideration of malicious complaints within complaints procedures (including ethical).
- Decouple considerations of legal frameworks and liability from ethics committees:
    - Establish a separate process to support and evaluate compliance with legal requirements.

- Adapt hiring criteria to reflect the varying contexts of fields, methods and risks:
    - Consider how to accommodate career breaks or delays that resulted from harm.
    - Investigate avenues to remove the incentives for risky behaviour.
- Consider broadening supervisory team structures to include method experts.
- Develop the role of ethics committees to consider and minimise harm as far as possible:
    - Provide ethics committees with training on harms facing researchers, mitigations and online environments.
    - Encourage and establish an ethics culture based on dialogue rather than prescriptive requirements.
    - Incentivise engagement with ethical review by committee members by appropriately resourcing them, including through sufficient time allocations.
- Hire mental health professionals with appropriate expertise for the research taking place in institutions, for example vicarious trauma.
- Establish funding pots to support the safety of unfunded researchers, for example accessing mental health support and relevant technology (Pruden 2024).
- Re-evaluate PhD programmes to incorporate support for harms which may affect the timeline for completion (Mattheis and Kingdon 2021).
- Inform the researcher of requests for information.
- Ask for the researcher's permission prior to publicising work.
- Offer granular control over publicly available information, including office number, photo, contact details.
- Make institutional resources available to PhD students and those on temporary contracts.

Funders/Government

- Encourage safe working practices by building funding into grants for mitigations, including sufficient leave and appropriate technology.
- Re-evaluate requirements for – or definitions of – impact in light of how they can create risk for researchers.
- Mandate institutions to provide sufficient support to researchers to protect the feasibility and breadth of research on the far right.
- Fund research into harms facing researchers and potential mitigations.

Community

- Develop and make public resources to educate researchers on risks – by researchers with direct expertise:
    - for example, the VOX-Pol 'The Next Gen Academic Survival Workshop Series: ECR Safety, Well-Being, and Ethics'[16] and Researcher Resources;[17] Association of Internet Researchers Risky Research working group.[18]
- Encourage and embody a culture change that challenges masochistic conceptions of harm as part of the work or researchers who discuss vulnerability as 'cry babies'.

16 https://www.voxpol.eu/events/the-vox-pol-next-gen-academic-survival-workshop-series-ecr-safety-well-being-and-ethics.

17 https://www.voxpol.eu/researcher-resources.

18 https://aoir.org/riskyresearchguide.

- Encourage and enable discussion of, and reflection on, researcher safety by:
    - integrating sessions on researcher safety into conference agendas
    - creating repositories of resources on researcher safety and mitigations.
- Establish and contribute to peer networks to support the development of junior researchers, mentoring where possible, such as that run by the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism.
- Develop remote networking events targeting early-career researchers/PhD students to help develop their networks.
- Advocate for and facilitate greater institutional awareness of, and engagement with, risks and potential mitigations.
- Following the victim's lead, offer support for colleagues when they experience harm, for example to reinforce the academic credentials of victims and the quality of their work.
- Encourage a culture change away from associating risks with individual behaviour.
- Work to eliminate the association between risk or experiences of harm with expertise.
- Reorient the perception of risks associated with researching the far right and manosphere away from it being inevitable.

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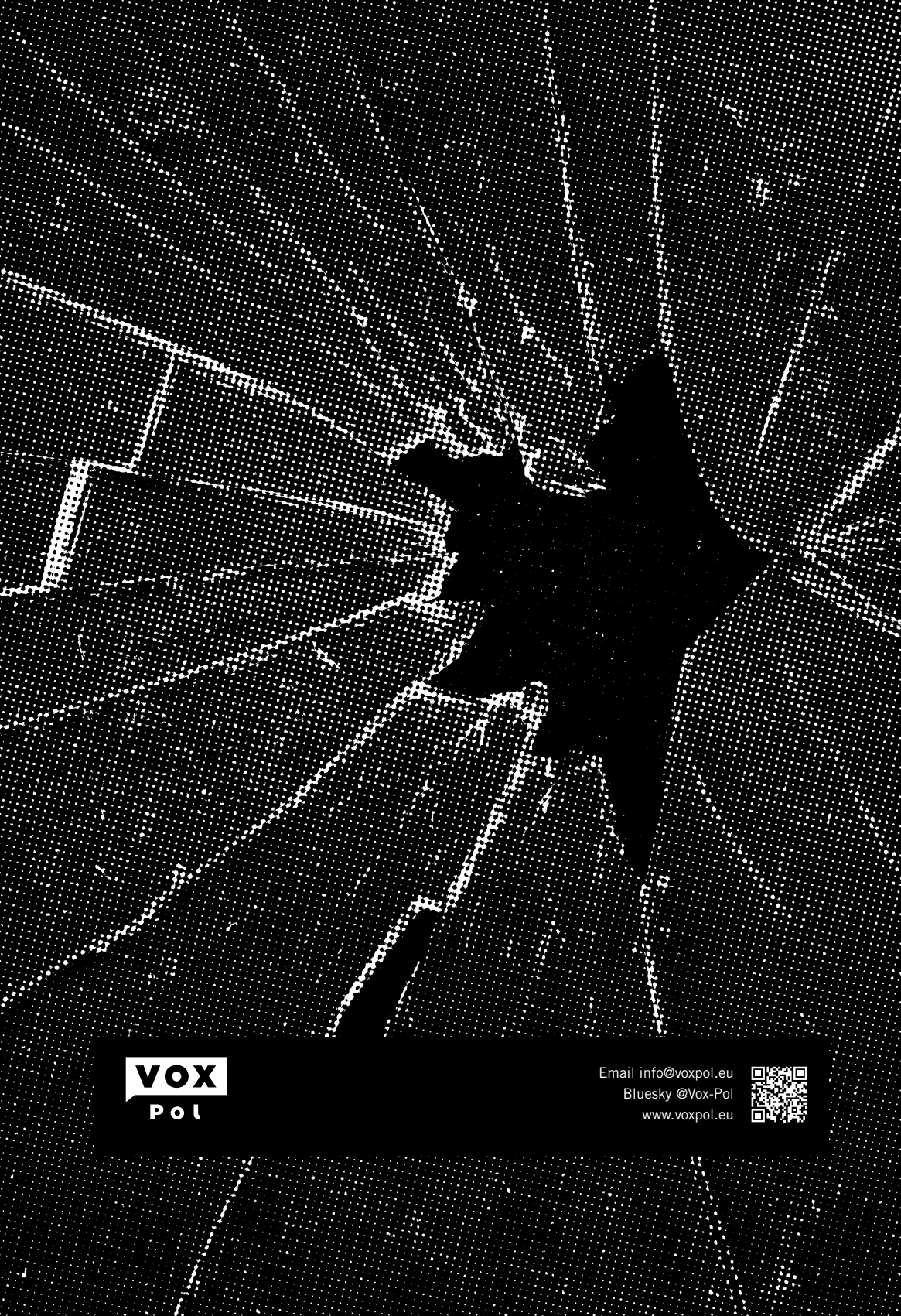

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