**Qualitative Research Symposium: Researcher Vulnerability  
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**Qualitative Analysis for Sensitive Online Research – How to Protect Against Researcher Vulnerabilities**

Researchers are increasingly utilising digital data to explore human behaviour in sensitive and challenging domains such as extremism and terrorism. At current, this research has been dominated by computational methods and the quantitative analysis of big data. While this research has no doubt been fruitful, we argue that qualitative methods offer an alternative that may better capture the nuances and intent behind behaviours illustrated by online postings. There is however, to our knowledge, no detailed guidance to support qualitative researchers when examining sensitive topics online. Sensitive research is defined as “research which poses a potential threat to those who are or who have been involved in it” (Lee, 1993) and may include topics such as terrorism, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, migration and racism. Each of these topics may evoke feelings of distress and anxiety and as such, researchers are arguably more likely to experience vulnerabilities when investigating them.

Here, we present a framework for conducting qualitative research on sensitive online material. Reflecting on experiences researching the far-right online, the framework considers how to protect against vulnerabilities at each stage of the research process and offers a practical guide for future sensitive research using digital data. For example - how to collect online data in a way that is ethical and appropriate? How to analyse extreme and sensitive data when it has the potential to cause distress? And, how to report the results of the research when rich quotations might be needed to represent findings.

In ending, we highlight the benefits of qualitative methods in sensitive online research and emphasise the need for researchers to protect against vulnerabilities when engaging in this work.