

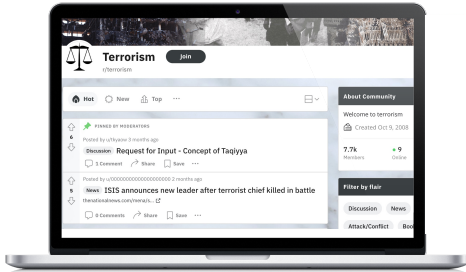


*Image from operation250

Psychological trauma and the observation of atrocities: Three factors to consider

Outline of the Problem

Members of the DHS workforce and terrorism researchers are systematically exposed to the propaganda, ideologies, and psychologies of actors who seek to launch terrorist attacks. This content is inherently value-laden and possibly personally troubling. We examined over 13,000 research articles across multiple fields of work in which individuals are exposed to traumatic imagery or events. We found that there is a small body of extant research focused on a few key domains (namely digital forensic and internet child sex abuse prevention) that has explored the significant psychological trauma caused by exposure to extreme content.



For anyone looking to learn more about the psychological trauma that stems from exposure to traumatic images and the psychological factors that can impact this process, **we identified three factors that are associated with the severity of the trauma experienced.** For more information read the full report [here](#).

Factor 1: Elements of the online content they are required to observe

Several studies highlighted how elements of the content itself impact trauma. The greatest trauma was caused by content that was (1) unexpected, (2) witnessed repeatedly, (3) reminded the individual of personal experiences or was in some way connected to them, and (4) contained sounds of human suffering such as screaming or people begging for their lives.

Factor 2: Organizational culture

Interviewees in some studies reported the important role of organizational culture in that, in some cultures there was a “tough up or get out” culture in which discussing vicarious trauma was viewed as virtually a complete taboo. Workload was also identified as a common factor in increasing the trauma caused by exposure to abhorrent online media.

Factor 3: Individual factors

Some research identified in this work identified that individual differences impact the degree of trauma experienced by the individual. For example, research found traumatic outcomes were higher in individuals with high trait introversion or neuroticism. Elsewhere, those protective factors of supportive loved ones and a healthy diet and exercise were found to mitigate trauma.