

Focus on the Researcher: Dealing with Distressing Data14th May 2021**Abstracts**Keynote**'It's the subtle language that gets to you': Understanding and managing researcher exposure to online child sexual grooming content.**

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What are the implications for language-in-context analysts of examining distressing data as either 'communicative resources' or as 'people'? (Georgakopoulou 2017); What counts as distressing data in the first place – or rather, for which language-in-context analysts may data be distressing, and when, where and why?; And (how) does language-in-context analysts' reflexivity towards working with data they perceive as distressing increase their resilience to further exposure to such data? In this presentation, I address these and related questions within a broader umbrella of ethics in (digital) research. The presentation concerns research into online child sexual abuse/exploitation (OCSAE). OCSAE is regarded as one of the most deviant forms of human behaviour (Durkin 2002), its victims often suffering lasting trauma (e.g., Hamilton-Giachritsis et al 2020). OCSAE is also regarded as one of the most disturbing and memorable types of content that those tasked with countering it – typically, law enforcement – may be exposed to (e.g., Wortley et al 2014).

During the presentation I draw from experience of working in two ongoing research projects into online child sexual grooming, which is a prevalent form of OCSAE. One of the projects is funded by UNICEF and runs within an academic environment (see <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/project-dragon-s/>). The other is a piece of consultancy commissioned – and run – by a leading social media company. Both projects involve multi-disciplinary/multi-agency teams. This enables insights into whether language-in-context analysts are impacted in similar or different ways to people working in other disciplines and in non-academic contexts when examining comparable data. The distinct environments in which each of the projects runs also enables reflection upon their respective support provision for analysts' wellbeing, including how these intersect with individuals' practices.

References

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Panel 1

Atrocious Quotes – Researching Pick-Up Artists and the Seduction Industry

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As part of our ongoing project work on *The Discursive Behavior of Pick-up Artists* (a community of men who learn and practice speed-seduction for short-term mating, forming part of the larger manosphere and seduction industry), we are constantly confronted with distressing data, not only in the form of extremely misogynistic material but also in graphic descriptions of violence against women. Early on in our engagement with this type of data (starting in 2015), we realized the toll that this type of material can take on our own wellbeing as researchers. Our focus on online data only added to this discomfort as it left us feeling that ‘they are everywhere’.

Working on this project as a team turned out immensely beneficial as we could provide regular emotional support to each other (evidenced by the amount of messages that we have exchanged on this subject). One of the coping mechanisms which we developed was a shared ‘atrocious quotes’ file into which we copied the worst material that we encountered. The mere process of acknowledging the ‘atrociousness’ of the specific data point proves to be cathartic. As a next step, we freed ourselves from the myth of ‘researcher neutrality’: We openly admit that we dislike our research participants and do not try to frame them in a neutral light (cf. Rüdiger & Dayter 2017), as this neutral framing can potentially already be misinterpreted. Regular reminders regarding the importance of this type of work are also immensely helpful.

References

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Breaks, boundaries and balance: Maintaining wellbeing when looking at online sexism

Alexandra Krendel, Jessica Aiston, Mark McGlashan, Veronika Koller

In this talk, we will discuss our experiences with the Mantrap research project, in which we analyse sexist forum data from a loose network of anti-feminist sites known as the manosphere. Broadly, the manosphere is made up of men’s rights activists, men-going-their-own-way (male separatists), pick-up artists, involuntary celibates, and those who engage with wider ‘red pill’ philosophy. In these posts, users describe their opinions of, and experiences with, women, using language which at times can be graphic and derogatory, and can describe instances of, or fantasies about, abusive and violent behaviour towards women.

These forum posts constitute distressing data because analysing the content can be psychologically harmful for the female researchers on the team in particular, eliciting physical discomfort and trauma responses. Moreover, by publishing and promoting our research, we potentially put ourselves at risk of harassment from the communities we analyse.

With a view to providing solutions to these issues, we then discuss how there may be safety in numbers when publishing research about potentially dangerous communities. We also highlight the importance of openly sharing our reactions to the data and personal limits within the team, and consider potentially analysing communities which provide a counterpoint to the manosphere. We conclude by asking whether more researchers are drawn to distressing data by factors such as the REF and impact agenda, and make a case for additional research on counter-discourses.

Navigating the Dangerous Waters of Investigating Socially Unacceptable Discourse Online

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Darja Fišer, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana; Jožef Stefan Institute, Slovenia

Socially unacceptable discourse (SUD) which encompasses various offensive and aggressive communication practices (Vehovar et al., 2020), is known to negatively impact individuals and society as a whole (Delgado, 2019). Less known, however, is its negative impact on the research team (cf. McCosker et al., 2001). While the unsettling effects of research are often discussed in social sciences, criminology, health and social work (cf. Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Hanna, 2019; Perron & Hiltz, 2006), this is less systematically addressed in linguistics, aside from interpreting studies (cf. Costa et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2015), despite the fact that researchers are becoming increasingly exposed to distressing data with a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary research problems.

In this paper we report the results of semi-structured interviews with two researchers in linguistics and four annotators who worked on the annotation of SUD types and targets in Croatian, English, French and Slovene Facebook comments about migrants and LGBTQ (Ljubešić et al., 2019). We will present the identified risk factors (e.g., the length of immersion, personal circumstances, netspeak characteristics) and implemented or suggested mitigation measures on three levels: institutional support (e.g., finances, personnel, risk assessment procedures, annotation training and guidelines), expert support (e.g., psychological debriefing) and informal support (e.g., peer groups). We will also touch upon the positive and negative effects of studying distressing data on the research itself (e.g., ensuring objectivity with overly (de)sensitized annotators). Furthermore, we will dispute two generally held beliefs that research-related distress is primarily bound to field-work and to qualitative studies. In fact, our experience shows that despite the remoteness, the online data can be highly burdening, and the interpretation of quantitative findings can carry a harmful effect comparable to qualitative analysis.

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Dealing with Distressing Data from Distressed Participants

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During my PhD, I explored how people who suffer from sexuality and gender-related obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) negotiated notions of normativity in their discourse. These people experience intrusive thoughts that generate a pathological doubt about their sexuality and gender identity. That is, they constantly question if they are gay, bi, queer, heterosexual, cis- or transgender, or other taboo forms of identifications (e.g., pedophiles, zoophiles, incest, rapist, etc.). In order to access this population, I created an online forum. As a recovered OCD sufferer, I used my relative notoriety within the OCD community to attract potential participants via social media. Ultimately I spent one year interacting with ca. 70 participants.

The setting up of this project required me to control three potential distressing factors: the distress I may cause to participants, the potential distress in reading graphic descriptions of horrible intrusive thoughts, and the distress of potentially fall back within the obsessive cycle of OCD. To mitigate these factors, several measures were taken according to the expectations of my university's ethics committee (whole process lasted one year): I followed a forum moderation course (where I learned how to deal with difficult and illegal content), and the psychology department was available to assist me in safeguarding my participants; I equally had the support of my psychotherapist, and discussed distressing data with peers to get through with some of the anxieties. Surprisingly, using humor with peers and sufferers – but also watching horror movies – was very cathartic during the research process.

Researching the Language of Traumatic Loss

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Grief is a universal human experience, yet certain types of bereavement are particularly likely to engender complex, lasting grief responses due to a variety of factors such as trauma, societal taboo, or a lack of shared experience (see e.g. Littlemore & Turner, 2020; Neria & Litz, 2004). Two such types of bereavement are pregnancy loss (encompassing miscarriage, termination for foetal abnormality, or stillbirth), and the death of a child at any age.

In this presentation, I reflect on my experiences over the past four years in which my main research focus has involved investigating the metaphorical language used in accounts of pregnancy loss and child death. Over the course of this research, I have been working with individuals who have shared vivid accounts of traumatic loss, including detailed descriptions of pregnancy loss, suicide, violent death, drug-related death, and terminal illness. I explore the challenges posed by this research: the need to hold space for interviewees while simultaneously acknowledging and processing my own emotional responses to what is being shared; the ways in which the accounts triggered personal responses surrounding my own attitudes towards reproduction, parenthood and family life; and the challenges of working with grief-related data while also experiencing a significant personal loss in 2018. I conclude by proposing ways to mitigate these challenges, including meaning-making strategies, creative resilience, and the importance of a supportive social network.

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Panel 3

Dealing with distressing data as a research Institute: a perspective from the Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics

Tim Grant, Sarah Atkins, Lucia Busso, Marton Petyko

The Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics was created in August 2019 from the pre-existing Centre for Forensic Linguistics, and currently comprises 23 staff, researchers and PhD students. Research at the Institute includes projects in the areas of child sexual exploitation and abuse, hate speech, online trolling and domestic violence, and some members of the Institute also carry out forensic linguistic casework that can involve disturbing data. To carry out these projects we collect and analyse audio data (including data of potentially distressing phone calls), social media data from the clear web, data from the dark web, and also data from web sites which are normally prohibited by University internet policies.

From the outset, we have recognised the potential for such research to cause harm and have placed researcher well-being at the heart of our research ethics policy. We have clear working policies with regard to working with disturbing data, including ensuring a supportive working environment, in which staff are able to discuss difficult aspects of their work with others. Our policies have also included providing more formal, Institute-wide psychological support. We have engaged a specialist psychologist, who is experienced at supporting police personnel engaged in investigations of online abuse, and she supports the Institute members collectively and individually, advising on both personal mitigation strategies and self-awareness, and on managing researchers working with these datasets.

This talk will describe the structures we have put in place and reflect on their effectiveness, particularly taking into account the exacerbating issues of the COVID lockdown on working with such data sets.

Fledgling Scholars: Supporting Undergraduate Researchers Analyzing Disturbing Data

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The involuntarily celibate (incel) community is among the most distressing spheres online. For novice undergraduate researchers in particular, studying such spaces can present unique challenges to their emotional and physical health. My own research explored incel race and gender politics as told by incel-created YouTube videos. Drawing upon my experience analyzing these videos, this paper discusses two challenges that undergraduate students face whilst conducting research on disturbing data: first, there is little institutional support structures available to undergraduates working with disturbing content. Internally, undergraduate research programs rarely offer students adequate training or mental health support. Externally, research networks often exclude undergraduate researchers by limiting mentorship programs and research safety workshops to graduate students. Secondly, the culture of stoicism within the extremism studies community on researcher mental health normalizes damaging data consumption habits. These conditions combined discouraged me from seeking help from experienced researchers. Despite these challenges, I received crucial support from scholars who took the initiative to offer me advice and encouragement. Here, such individual acts of care fueled my continued engagement with the research project. Going forth, this paper argues that universities and research institutions should devote more resources to supporting undergraduate and early-stage graduate students analyzing distressing data. Additionally, I contend that more instructors teaching courses dealing with disturbing content should weave in researcher welfare literature as part of their curriculum. Such steps will not only shed light on an integral part of the research process, but also encourage undergraduates to develop healthy research habits.

Techniques for building and maintaining mental fitness when working with distressing data

Andrea Vaughan
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My research focuses on the language of suicide and suicidal ideation on social media, using datasets such as suicide notes shared on blogging sites and content posted on suicide support discussion forums. I have experienced a variety of challenges during data collection, analysis and the writing up stage of these projects.

These data have included discussion of: planned and previous suicide attempts; self-harm tools, techniques and outcomes; psychiatric disorders; life-limiting illnesses or diseases; eating disorders; substance abuse; abuse from another person; negative experiences with healthcare professionals and other interventional care methods; reactions to any medication; military experience; and other major life changes. Furthermore, research often includes reading of statistics detailing the number of lives lost annually, globally, to suicide.

Statistics and the size of the dataset can feel overwhelming and make the researcher feel insignificant. As motivation to research difficult topics can be due to direct or indirect personal experience, this can lead to difficulty separating experiences detailed in the dataset from any that mirror the researcher's history, or which are upsetting for the researcher to imagine living with.

This presentation discusses techniques and tools I have used to mitigate these challenges. First, a holistic approach to personal mental health maintenance using a Wellness Wheel. Then, an overview of how I apply sports coaching techniques to time management and project planning, in order to build the mental fitness necessary for data analysis. For example: alternative uses of the Pomodoro technique; Trello project planning; and tracking and managing the speed/efficiency trade-off.

Please note: Jennifer O'Donovan's abstract for her talk: *Dealing with Distressing Data: Abortion* (Panel 2) is available on request