



# Success and Harm When Researching the Far Right: Researcher Safety as Epistemic Exclusion

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## Abstract

*Harm experienced while researching the far right can be encountered through, or sparked by, core academic activities which reduce the distance between the researcher and potentially hostile actors. Currently, advice to manage such risks is directed towards the individual, made responsible by a neoliberal industry and lack of institutional knowledge. However, the ability of researchers to implement such advice is stymied by success metrics that reward visibility and productivity, producing a contradiction between success and safety—satisfying one risks jeopardizing the other. The contradiction is not evenly experienced, with those at the sharp end of the far right disproportionately vulnerable to such harm and thus subject to such “choices.”*

*Drawing on a set of 21 interviews with researchers of the far right and manosphere, this article argues that the current approach to researcher safety has epistemological implications by affecting the type of research that can take place and who can contribute to the production of knowledge (safely, that is). These findings indicate that we must understand these challenges as representative of a broader “epistemic exclusion” that “unwarrantedly hinders one’s ability ... to participate in knowledge production.”*

Keywords: ethics, researcher safety, social media

Academic use of the digital public sphere takes advantage of a range of opportunities to engage in and disseminate research, develop a network, and accrue academic capital. It was welcomed as a space with few barriers to access, where junior scholars can circumvent traditional hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> These practices are crucial for the core goal of academia (knowledge production), but also for researchers to meet the demands of institutions to market their research in “the current neoliberal academic marketplace.”<sup>2</sup> However, it is a sphere that carries risk, particularly for those at the sharp end of the far right, with identity mediating the frequency and severity of harm. For researchers of the far right, it may involve direct engagement with hostile actors or being present and visible in the same spaces as the people espousing and defending the structurally violent politics they research.

While harm is not inevitable, the potential risks require some mitigation. However, these mitigations largely happen at the individual level due to a lack of engagement from other stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> Pearson et al. note that the risk of harm can disincentivize researchers from publicizing research or engaging in research in the first place.<sup>4</sup> The risk “means scholars must be thoughtful as to how they will engage (if at all) before, during, and after the research process. This stands in stark contrast to the ways researchers are trained to think about promoting work to their intellectual communities and the public.”<sup>5</sup> Visibility in the public sphere is an important factor as it increases the likelihood of coming to the attention of hostile actors.

With the digital public sphere increasingly important for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, we must consider the implications of mandating engagement with a risky environment where harm is experienced unevenly. This article theorizes current approaches to researcher safety by researchers of the far right and mansphere to be an issue of “epistemic exclusion,” since it materially impacts who can safely produce and disseminate knowledge. First, this paper discusses the current literature on researcher safety, the risk landscape, and risk mitigations. Next, it considers how the neoliberal environment of academia<sup>6</sup> influences dissemination priorities and success metrics. Finally, it applies “epistemic exclusion” to understand how the management of safety and success affects who can contribute to knowledge production.

Current efforts to improve researcher safety and tackle existing challenges are laudable and urgent. They are the necessary first step toward improving the research environment and safeguarding those entering a field that carries inherent risk. To complement and extend these efforts, this article points to a critical element that requires more attention: the impact of the current approach to researcher safety on the creation of knowledge and who can contribute to that process, a core goal of academia. In particular, it seeks to problematize the increasing necessity of visibility associated with knowledge production and engagement in light of the risks posed by hostile actors and lack of support.

1 Chiara Carrozza, “Re-Conceptualizing Social Research in the ‘Digital Era’: Issues of Scholarships, Methods, and Epistemologies,” *Analise Social* LIII, no. 228 (2018): 652–671, <https://doi.org/10.31447/as00032573.2018228.05>.

2 Emma Kavanagh and Lorraine Brown, “Towards a Research Agenda for Examining Online Gender-Based Violence against Women Academics,” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44, no. 10 (2019): 1379–1387, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1688267>.

3 Elizabeth Pearson, Joe Whittaker, Till Baaken, Sarah Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, and Maura Conway, “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers’ Security, Safety, and Resilience: Findings from the Field,” *Vox-Pol*, 2023, <https://www.voxpol.eu/download/report/Online-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Researchers-Security-Safety-Resilience.pdf>.

4 Pearson et al., “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers.”

5 Adrienne Massanari, “Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the ‘Alt-Right’ Gaze,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 2 (2018): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118768302>.

6 Mark Olssen and Michael A. Peters, “Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism,” *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (2005): 313–345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718>; Fabian Cannizzio, “Tactical Evaluations: Everyday Neoliberalism in Academia,” *Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2018): 77–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783318759094>.

## **The Data**

The ideas discussed in this article are drawn from interviews done with 21 researchers of the far right and manosphere: 19 of the researchers were junior, doing PhDs or on insecure contracts; 16 are women and five are men; and some participants mentioned identities they felt relevant, including being Jewish or bisexual. These interviews were interested in discussing how researchers viewed and practiced researcher safety within the academic environment, touching on institutions, professional pressures, their research, and experiences of harm. The interviews lasted between 30 and 105 minutes, and were semi-structured in nature, following avenues of interest introduced by the interviewee.<sup>7</sup>

Through the interviews, it became clear that the management of researcher safety has epistemological implications. Many of the researchers spoke of difficulties, fears, or risks associated with core academic practices including publications and public scholarship. The researchers who followed the guidance on researcher safety most closely were also the ones who felt most unable to contribute to scholarship without sacrificing some element of safety. They were also the most likely to express a desire to leave academia if they could not be safe. In this article I consider the implications of the current approach to researcher safety and academic success specifically for how knowledge is produced, and who can participate in these practices. A separate article considers interviewees' experiences with institutional risk management (through institutional ethics) in more depth; a report delves into the barriers to researcher safety, arguing that individual management is ineffective and that safety pivots on knowledge and engagement (what is known and what can be done). The focus of this article and ideas within emerged from the conversations with the interviewees and reflections on the scholars' situation within the industry. In these discussions, it was striking how many of the steps that scholars took to preserve their safety directly impacted their engagement with the mechanisms of knowledge production and how these impacts were felt unevenly.

## **Safety When Researching the Far Right**

The field has benefitted from a recent burgeoning literature on the risks involved in researching the far right and how to mitigate them. This literature conceptualizes researchers as a potentially vulnerable party, with risk present in all stages of research.<sup>8</sup> Efforts have been directed towards surveying the field and increasing the amount of knowledge available, working to equip stakeholders with the skills necessary to mitigate risks as far as possible. Awareness is a key issue, since this research has found that researchers, supervisors, and institutions are often unaware of the full range of risks prior to engaging in research.<sup>9</sup> This presents a missed opportunity to mitigate the harms where possible.

Pearson et al. have conceptualized the harms as internal and external: internal is defined as the "psychological or emotional issues" associated with the consumption of content, while external is defined as "that caused by a third party, including experiences such as cyber-hate, networked harassment, hostile emails, doxing, and direct messages involving death threats or sexual abuse."<sup>10</sup> Interviewees found internal harms difficult to describe, but reported feeling deeply affected by content, feeling a compulsion to keep researching beyond reasonable hours, and depression. Interviewee A14 illustrated the impact of a long period of analysis, mentioning that they "kind of started seeing ghosts everywhere." Interviewees shared experiences of online harassment, including severe insults, rape and death threats, and sexual

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Pearson, "Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers."

<sup>9</sup> Pearson.

<sup>10</sup> Pearson.

harassment. One interviewee reported a hostile actor seeking to intimidate them by turning up to a public talk; more reported harassment via complaints to their institution. The impact of these harms can be substantial, with researchers reporting significant emotional and temporal cost.<sup>11</sup> Researcher vulnerability to harm varies depending on the methodology, topic, participants, and most significantly the positionality of the researcher. Positionality is critical as “certain identity markers” live at the sharp end of the far right and are more vulnerable to both internal and external harm.<sup>12</sup> These researchers are not just vulnerable to vicarious trauma but could also arguably experience direct trauma, since it is not “just hateful rhetoric but direct attacks on their humanity”<sup>13</sup>—they are already “participants.”<sup>14</sup>

Guidance on how to mitigate risks acknowledges the lack of institutional engagement with risk mitigation, and thus focuses recommendations on the individual.<sup>15</sup> Much of this guidance is drawn from personal experience of harm or personal practices. With visibility an important factor for external harm, increasing the likelihood the researcher comes to the attention of hostile actors, advice tends towards obscurity and withdrawal from public spheres. Additionally, a greater engagement with the internet means that more information is available which can then be leveraged. Internal harm relates to exposure to content, with recommendations pivoting on moderating consumption and implementing healthy working practices.<sup>16</sup> Engaging with mental health support is recommended, as is a supportive working environment.

This literature acknowledges several barriers to safe research on the far right. As noted, institutions receive significant criticism for their absence as meaningful stakeholders, with few being aware or engaged with the issue.<sup>17</sup> Scholars have called on institutions to recognize the risks associated with core practices and offer more support and training for those entering the field.<sup>18</sup> Pearson et al. raise particular concern for isolated individuals who may not have formed broader networks prior to engaging in research,<sup>19</sup> thus lacking access to experienced peers who may have gained knowledge through experience.

However, although interviewees felt the need to take steps to be safe (largely involving obscurity), they operate within an academic environment that prioritizes and rewards visibility and engagement with the public sphere. As a result, scholars are required to, or rewarded for, participating in behaviors they are simultaneously taught to avoid.

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11 George Veletsianos, Shandell Houlden, Jai-gris Hodson, and Chandell Gosse, “Women Scholars’ Experiences with Online Harassment and Abuse: Self-Protection, Resistance, Acceptance, and Self-Blame,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 12 (2018): 4689–4708, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818781324>; Pearson, “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers”.

12 Maura Conway, “Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics: Researcher Safety, Informed Consent, and the Need for Tailored Guidelines,” *Ethics and Terrorism* (2021): 147–160, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222873-12>.

13 Hannah Allam, “In the Mostly White World of Extremism Research, New Voices Emerge,” *Washington Post*, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/06/25/extremism-researchers-diversity/>.

14 Conway, “Online Extremism and Terrorism”.

15 Alice E. Marwick and Robyn Caplan, “Drinking Male Tears: Language, the Manosphere, and Networked Harassment,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 543–559, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1450568>; Pearson, “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers.”

16 Miron Lakomy and Maciej Bożek, “Understanding the Trauma-Related Effects of Terrorist Propaganda on Researchers,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)*, May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-119>; Emma Williamson, Alison Gregory, Hilary Abrahams, Nadia Aghtaie, Sarah-Jane Walker, and Marianne Hester, “Secondary Trauma: Emotional Safety in Sensitive Research,” *Journal of Academic Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2020): 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-019-09348-y>.

17 Ashley Mattheis and Ashton Kingdon, “Does the Institution Have a Plan for That? Researcher Safety and the Ethics of Institutional Responsibility,” in *Researching Cybercrimes: Methodologies, Ethics, and Critical Approaches*, ed. Anita Lavorgna and Thomas J. Holt, 1st ed. (London: Springer International Publishing, 2021), pp.457–472; Pearson, “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers.”

18 Pearson.

19 Pearson.

## Knowledge Production and Academic Capitalism<sup>20</sup>

Researchers of the far right and manosphere work within an academic environment that has its own set of behavioral requirements, particularly in relation to the core goal: knowledge production. The dissemination of research is central to knowledge production as “no new discovery, brilliant insight, or original interpretation has any significance until it is made available to others.”<sup>21</sup> It is the mechanism through which ideas and findings can be exchanged and evaluated with peers and “has gained cultural and political influence as the guarantor of reliable knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, these activities do not just report knowledge, but are “actively *constitutive* of that knowledge” (emphasis in original).<sup>23</sup> While more traditional mechanisms such as journal articles retain their importance, the digital public sphere is an increasingly important space through which researchers can disseminate and meet the range of success metrics. Alongside the familiar “publish or perish,” D’Alessandro et al. have detailed a new requirement to “promote or perish,” with engagement with academic social networking sites (ASNS) a key tool.<sup>24</sup>

Olssen and Peters note that “the ascendancy of neoliberalism” has had a marked impact on how higher education operates and what is valued<sup>25</sup>—what Slaughter and Leslie have termed “the regime of academic capitalism.”<sup>26</sup> An environment of competition follows through to “market-like” behaviors such as the need to compete for funding from external sources who determine who or what gets funded.<sup>27</sup> In the academic environment, the value of knowledge has moved away from being a public good towards being a commodity,<sup>28</sup> with governments evaluating the “return on investment” and relative value of research.<sup>29</sup> Dynamics of competition are used to generate “productivity, accountability and control,” with evaluation metrics (also valuing engagement and impact) used to imagine the “ideal worker.”<sup>30</sup> Productivity is measured through the “principle” of publish or perish as “recruitment, promotion, and tenure appear to be decided primarily based on the number of articles published

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20 Drawing on the work of Sheila Slaughter, Larry L. Leslie, and Gary Rhoades, this article understands academic capitalism to be the behaviors or mechanisms through which “public and nonprofit institutions increasingly engage in market and marketlike activities” such as part-time faculty, commercialization, competition, and the encouragement of entrepreneurialism. This theorization considers how academia is connected to the “new economy” wherein “knowledge is a raw material to be converted to products, processes, or services.” It is particularly helpful to understand the broader institutional and economic structures and behaviors that may shape individual actions. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 15; Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, “Expanding and Elaborating the Concept of Academic Capitalism,” *Organization* 8, no. 2 (2001): 154–161, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508401082003>; Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

21 Ken Hyland, *Academic Publishing: Issues and Challenges in the Construction of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

22 Hyland, *Academic Publishing*, 2.

23 Hyland, *Academic Publishing*, 3.

24 Steven D’Alessandro, Morgan Miles, Francisco J. Martínez-López, Rafael Anaya-Sánchez, Irene Esteban-Millat, and Harold Torrez-Meruvia, “Promote or Perish? A Brief Note on Academic Social Networking Sites and Academic Reputation,” *Journal of Marketing Management* 36, nos. 5–6 (2019): 405–411, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2019.1697104>.

25 Mark Olssen and Michael A. Peters, “Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism,” *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (2005): 313–345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718>.

26 Slaughter and Leslie, “Expanding and Elaborating,” 2001.

27 Slaughter and Leslie, “Expanding and Elaborating.”

28 Slaughter and Leslie.

29 Andrew Gunn and Michael Mintrom, “Measuring Research Impact in Australia,” *Australian Universities’ Review* 60, no. 1 (2018): 9–15.

30 Olssen and Peters “Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy” 2005; Rodrigo Rosa, “The Trouble with ‘Work–Life Balance’ in Neoliberal Academia: A Systematic and Critical Review,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 31, no. 1 (2021): 55–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1933926>.

in a fairly select group of peer-reviewed journals, based on their relative impact, selectivity, and relevance to ... rankings.<sup>31</sup> Engagement and impact are variously defined by funders (and occasionally merged), but generally refer to dissemination to the academic sphere and wider society and demonstrable changes to stakeholder actions.<sup>32</sup>

With connection to academic and non-academic communities necessary, the digital public sphere was initially welcomed as a space through which barriers of access could be reduced or removed. Social networking sites were important spaces to “de-institutionalize information” as “critically engaged scholarship has embraced digital platforms to communicate, diffuse, and archive.”<sup>33</sup> Beyond access to peers, developing a public presence can help get research in front of policymakers and other stakeholders, helping meet grant requirements or demonstrate impact.<sup>34</sup> Tressie McMillan Cottom has situated this practice within the broader importance of “academic capitalism” which “promotes engaged academics as an empirical measure of a university’s reputational currency.”<sup>35</sup> The impact of social engagement can be numerically assessed through tools such as “alt-metrics,” with these sites increasingly viewed “as a proxy indicator of an academic’s reputation,” including for retention and promotion.<sup>36</sup> Scholars have used the network of social media sites as a tool of “professional branding,” helping “accrue academic capital” by constructing their “scholarly identity.”<sup>37</sup>

The academic and digital environments are not experienced uniformly by academics, nor are success metrics. Marginalized researchers face an “academic climate [experienced] as inhospitable, discriminatory, and plagued with bias.”<sup>38</sup> This climate impacts on the experiences and well-being of scholars and affects “the nature and trajectory of their scholarship.”<sup>39</sup> Wijesingha and Ramos found that “the significance of being racialized had a consistent and direct effect on being tenured and promoted.”<sup>40</sup> Traditional routes of dissemination can gatekeep access to the production of knowledge with stringent requirements producing exclusionary mechanisms, particularly affecting scholars in the Global South.<sup>41</sup> While the online sphere is so important for knowledge production, it is experienced as more hostile to women and marginalized researchers, often targeting their identity and expertise, to the extent that abuse is “normal part of online experience.”<sup>42</sup>

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31 Mark De Rond and Alan N. Miller, “Publish or Perish,” *Journal of Management Inquiry* 14, no. 4 (2005): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492605276850>.

32 Gunn and Mintrom, “Measuring Research Impact in Australia.”

33 Tressie McMillan Cottom, “Who Do You Think You Are?” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 7 (2015), <https://adanew-media.org/2015/04/issue7-mcmillancottom/>.

34 D’Alessandro et al., “Promote or Perish?”

35 Cottom, “Who Do You Think You Are?”

36 D’Alessandro et al. “Promote or Perish?”

37 Sugimoto, Cassidy R., Sam Work, Vincent Larivière, and Stefanie Haustein, “Scholarly Use of Social Media and Altmetrics: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 68, no. 9 (2017): 2037–2062, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23833>.

38 Settles et al., “Epistemic Exclusion.”

39 Settles et al.

40 Rochelle Wijesingha and Howard Ramos, “Human Capital or Cultural Taxation: What Accounts for Differences in Tenure and Promotion of Racialized and Female Faculty?” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 47, no. 3 (2017): 54–75, <https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v47i3.187902>.

41 A. Suresh Canagarajah, “‘Nondiscursive’ Requirements in Academic Publishing, Material Resources of Periphery Scholars, and the Politics of Knowledge Production,” *Written Communication* 13, no. 4 (1996): 435–472, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088396013004001>.

42 Marwick and Caplan, “Drinking Male Tears”; Veletsianos et al., “Women Scholars’ Experiences with Online Harassment and Abuse”; Cottom, “Who Do You Think You Are?”; Kavanagh, “Towards a Research Agenda.”

### **The Tension between Success and Safety: Epistemic Exclusion in Researcher Safety**

To contribute to academic knowledge production, researchers must engage in the various dissemination and impact activities. Visibility and productivity are necessary to meet success metrics and develop the academic capital to successfully compete in the market conditions. However, while public engagement bolsters the academic reputation of both the researcher and the institution, it also creates a target for harassment and hostility—in part by producing more information than would otherwise be available. Moreover, such requirements contradict the behaviors recommended to be safe: obscurity and the moderated consumption of content. Researchers must limit their engagement with the public sphere to be safe, but must increase their engagement to be successful. They must limit their exposure to violent content to be safe, but must increase their exposure to be productive. The contradictory recommendations produce an antagonism where success comes at the expense of safety or vice versa, with a cost to the researcher no matter the choice made. However, considering that these metrics are a necessary component to staying in academia and participating in knowledge production, framing behaviors as choices overlooks the ramifications of the dynamic on the researcher and academia more broadly.

Firstly, the digital public sphere is not just a space occupied by peers, policymakers, and civil society, but also those advocating the politics being researched. While researchers aim, and are encouraged to, disseminate work to the greatest extent, context collapse may result in “different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly ... crashing into each other.”<sup>43</sup> Although researchers may be intending to disseminate findings to peers and stakeholders, they may instead speak to adherents, which radically changes the potential risks associated. Two interviewees mentioned seeing academic articles circulated within groups, and a third (A6) shared that “even just by being more active, I would worry that I would draw the ire of people that I study potentially.” Similar dynamics have been observed with journal articles and pieces of public scholarship. With the potential for retributive action, engagement with the public sphere carries risk. A13 shared that “I don’t talk about the specifics of my research usually [for safety reasons], which is problematic because as academics we need to promote our research.” They went on to share: “I do have concerns about being able to promote my work for professional reasons and balancing out personal safety. I haven’t found the secret sauce yet for that.” As such, although the digital public sphere has been considered a boon for facilitating public engagement, for researchers of the far right it reduces the barriers between them and their potential research subjects or the hostile audience.

Critically, the antagonism does not affect researchers equally. As noted, both the digital public sphere and academia are more hostile to marginalized researchers, particularly when the identities are visible or discussed<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, the risks of researching the far right and manosphere increase with proximity to the topic, again affecting those at the sharp end of the far right. This is recognized by scholars. As A5 states: “I thought, you know, in terms of everything that incels despise is probably, it’s probably me.” The antagonism becomes more fraught for researchers at the sharp end of the far right who are more vulnerable to harm and must meet harsher success metrics. A Jewish researcher, conscious of their public identity, stated that “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” (A7). Other researchers expressed feeling “the need” to do “community engaged and like public intellectual work, which comes with an

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43 J.L. Davis and N. Jurgenson, “Context Collapse: Theorizing Context Collusions and Collisions,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 4 (2014): 476–485, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2014.888458>.

44 See Sara Ahmed’s *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) for a discussion of the gap between institutions’ proclaimed approaches to diversity and the lived experiences of marginalized researchers.



increased risk” (A13)—a necessity for many interviewees who engaged with this topic with the intention of making a difference.

As a means of managing risk, participants discussed how concerns about safety materially impacted the topics researched, the methods used, the way that research was conceptualized, and how findings were disseminated. Participants mentioned avoiding studying topics because of the potential risk associated. Similarly, a doctoral student interviewed by Pearson et al. chose to not research incels because “we don’t know what the consequences might be.”<sup>45</sup> Other participants explained that they did not consider interviews and in-person attendance at protests an option because of the possible risks and lack of institutional support. Conversely, some interviewees engaged in interviews with far-right actors knowing that there was a level of risk, but felt that there were few alternatives available to collect the data they needed. These direct relationships can exacerbate the risks of public engagement by creating a ready-made hostile audience, particularly when the output is critical. Two participants changed the outputs of their research because of harassment—one avoiding non-academic dissemination, as well as the publicizing of academic outputs, and the other changing the phrasing of output based on previous experiences. Participants generally perceived engagement with the public sphere to carry more risk than academic spaces, because the research is more likely to come to the attention of hostile actors. However, two participants explicitly expressed concerns around journal publications, especially with the push towards open access. While it is a laudable aim to increase accessibility, it also removes some of the barriers that almost create a level of protection.

With the antagonism affecting researchers’ abilities (or ability to choose) to contribute to knowledge production unevenly, theorizations of “epistemic exclusion” are useful to illuminate the various ramifications of the dynamic. Epistemic exclusion is concerned with “key intersections of knowledge and power,”<sup>46</sup> and has been defined as phenomena that “unwarrantedly hinders one’s ability ... to participate in knowledge production,”<sup>47</sup> hermeneutical marginalization more specifically referring to social groups that have “less than a fair crack at contributing to the shared pool of concepts and interpretive tropes that we use to make generally shareable sense of our social experiences.”<sup>48</sup> The choice of whether or not to participate is an *epistemic* concern because it involves locations of knowledge production and dissemination; it functions as *exclusionary* because such decisions disproportionately affect marginalized scholars.

The antagonism makes knowledge production and distribution exclusionary in part through its invisibility. Without highlighting how safety and success can require contradictory behaviors they seem equally achievable, rendering the factors that mediate access unseen and unacknowledged. While marginalized researchers of risky subjects must make decisions that compromise their success or their safety, they are ultimately evaluated on the same playing field as more privileged colleagues who do not experience the same dynamic. This disincentivizes engagement with safe behavior unless the researcher is resigned to the consequences of ‘failing,’ as decision-makers do not make decisions in the context of the topic and methodology. As a result, for researchers who wish to be safe, knowledge dissemination is challenged; for researchers that wish to be successful, harm is likely. Without an explicit consideration of how success and safety are more possible for some than others, necessary adjustments to support marginalized researchers cannot be made.

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45 Pearson, “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers.”

46 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

47 Kristie Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,” *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115–138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>; Settles et al., “Epistemic Exclusion.”

48 Fricker, “Epistemic Injustice and the Preservation of Ignorance.”



The narrow range of activities that enable a researcher to meet success metrics (many of which require visibility) complicates their ability to contribute to knowledge production if they prioritize safety. As a result, those who are more vulnerable to harm cannot meet the success metrics in another way, because these are the options available. Adrienne Massanari detailed a few alternatives such as the ability to anonymize publications or publish as a collective.<sup>49</sup> However, with the current system rewarding professional branding and the accrual of academic capital, these options would again require some kind of loss to the individual. Massanari acknowledges that such changes would “challenge the entire editorial process” and “standards of evaluation” for hiring and promotion.<sup>50</sup> It would arguably also require adaptations to how grants are reviewed, with many often having a section devoted to impact and/or engagement. The restrictive routes to meeting these requirements raise questions as to how researchers can be funded to research safely.

## **Discussion and Concluding Thoughts**

Researchers experience the academic and digital spheres unevenly, with implications for their ability to meet success metrics that value visibility and productivity. In detailing how risk management interacts with core academic practices, this article seeks to highlight the presence of an antagonism between success and safety and its ramifications for *who* can contribute to knowledge production and *how* they can do it. Literature and my participants offer some suggestions, indicating that this issue particularly affects women and marginalized researchers, and engagement with the digital public sphere.<sup>51</sup> With this dynamic particularly affecting the ability of researchers to participate in knowledge production, the theorization of “epistemic exclusion” is a potentially valuable lens through which we can understand how safety directly impacts the core goals of academia.

Working within an environment where the far right is resurgent brings urgency to these considerations. Far-right politicians and parties saw success in Italy and the Netherlands (among others) and are emboldened online, making critical scholarship all the more necessary, and engagement with knowledge production and public scholarship as an early-career researcher potentially more fraught. One interviewee was particularly concerned about speaking out about their national context because a far-right politician was active in the same public spaces. As a recipient of government funding, and universities occasionally respondent to pressure, gaining such attention—or even the threat of it—could be detrimental to their capacity to contribute and their career. Contributing to knowledge production in this environment needs more effective support as it has disproportionate and uneven impacts. Interviewees who expressed an interest in leaving academia tended to be those who were more concerned about safety; those who were conscious of the visibility of their engagement felt less safe.

Detailing these experiences helps us understand how “structural forces and systems can undermine the production and interpretation of academic knowledge produced by marginalized individuals.”<sup>52</sup> Considering safety and success in unison is critical as “without such discussions, it may be difficult to see where ‘neutral’ metrics of quality actually introduce systematic bias into the evaluation process.”<sup>53</sup> As highlighted by Pearson et al., “as long as the risks are most keenly felt by those with less status and less security—whether job security or security from hostile actors—inequalities in

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49 Massanari, *Rethinking Research Ethics*.

50 Massanari, 5.

51 Pearson et al., “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers,” 2023; Massanari, “Rethinking Research Ethics,” 2018.

52 Settles et al., “Epistemic Exclusion.”

53 Settles et al.

academia can be exacerbated in a vicious cycle.<sup>54</sup> The end result is “what [Eric] Ward calls ‘a self-replicating system of Whiteness.’”<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the ability of researchers to progress, scholars of color researching the far right highlight some further urgent considerations for how safety and identity impact epistemology, such as how “it’s not just a question of justice and representation, but also one of national security. They argue that the narrower the perspective, the narrower the view of the threat.”<sup>56</sup> These scholars also pointed to terminology that obscures “the specific anti-Blackness of some attacks” as well as overlooking the significance of the resurgence of the far right as consequences of their contributions being rendered invisible.<sup>57</sup> Working towards a system where safety *and* success are both achievable thus has implications for both who can contribute to the production of knowledge, and the knowledge that is produced.

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54 Pearson et al., “Online Extremism and Terrorism Researchers.”

55 Allam, “In the Mostly White World.”

56 Allam.

57 Allam.