

Researching the Far-Right: Tips and Tricks for Maintaining Wellbeing and Addressing Bias

As the Far-Right continues to significantly influence contemporary politics and threaten inter- and intra-national stability and minority groups, there is an understandable (and needed!) accelerating interest in investigating research questions to better understand and combat the very real threat represented by the contemporary Far-Right. These research topics can include contemporary conservatism of any sort, the 'Manosphere', the incel movement, anti-feminist movements, neo-naziism, and a wide variety of others. These topics offer many advantages to researchers: they are inherently interesting and compelling research; there is much opportunity for originality as they tend to be quite under-studied; and they effectively answer one of the hardest questions inherent in all research - "Why is this important to research?". However, topics like this also offer a variety of unique challenges: they are inherently demotivating and uncomfortable to engage with; they will likely garner critique and potential harassment from the Far-Right; and generating impact out of the research is extremely difficult. This document is intended for anyone who identifies their work (or work they're considering) as focused on the Far-Right, but can also apply effectively to any other work on distressing or triggering topics. In this document, we will give advice and tips for those either working in or considering work in this area, as well as some broader discussion of how identity and privilege factor into this work.

The advice present in this document comes out of the lived experiences of Rob Dickinson and Tom Cowin in their individual work on the Far-Right but particularly out of their shared work as founders of the Far-Right Radicalisation in Alternative Media Sources (FRAMES) Project. Founded in 2020, the FRAMES Project has so far focused on the Prager University Foundation as a central hub and producer of Far-Right propaganda and chief influence in the rightward radicalisation of Americans. After introducing PragerU to academia in our [first paper](#), we have gone on to produce several other [blog posts](#), contribute to a [podcast](#), inform a delightful [Youtube video](#) explaining our work better than we ever could, create a second paper on PragerU's role within the ongoing Critical Race Theory (CRT) moral panic in the United States, and gather a 10-person cohort of academics and Youtubers currently working on the first book ever written about PragerU.

Alongside this shared work, Rob's individual research focuses on Far-Right misinformation, particularly regarding COVID and the Anti-Vaxxer movement, as well as previous work in the areas of global inequality, extreme poverty, modern slavery, and historical (and contemporary) colonialism, imperialism, neoliberalism, and necropolitics. Rob clearly tends towards distressing topics. Tom works on a slightly earlier period, examining the rise and mainstreaming of the Tea Party, and the contrasting fate of its contemporary protest movement, Occupy Wall Street. Tom mobilises stigma power, hegemony and discourse analysis to try and understand the interplay between the extreme and the mainstream.

Approaching the Content

1. Focus on your passions

There is a reason you have chosen to engage with this work. Reflect on your motivations for investigating these topics, and hold onto that motivation. Allow your passion, anger, personal experiences, or whatever else might motivate you to do just that.

2. Remember, you're part of a community

Even if you have not yet begun engaging in this research, your interest in it means that you are already a part of a larger community investigating these topics and working against the Far-Right and the oppression that extreme conservatism and contemporary capitalism force onto us all. Hold onto that feeling of solidarity and togetherness. If you can, find a research partner! Talk to people in your life about this work and allow them to comfort you. This work will be draining and difficult and at times painful. The people around you personally and the larger research community you are now a part of (Rob and Tom included!) are your greatest resource for support.

3. If it doesn't work out for you, that's ok!

As you begin to perform this work, you may realise it is not for you. It may be simply too uncomfortable or distressing, produce anxieties or burn you out. In any of those cases, or for any reason, it is OK to stop. Remember, there is a community working on these topics and a whole variety of ways to engage with the collective work going to improve our communities and address societal oppression and the Far-Right. Research is neither the easiest nor most effective form of activism. If it does not work for you, or stops working for you, consider alternative ways to get involved.

4. Acknowledge your biases

It is always tempting as a researcher to pretend that objectivity is possible, and that bias is something that can be prevented. Unfortunately, the reality is that biases are always present in research, and the motivation for research performed is itself a bias. In the case of studying the Far-Right, it is essential to recognise and acknowledge your biases. As researchers, Tom and I are unabashedly biased against the Far-Right and we hope that all involved in this research are as well. We can work rigorously toward performing high-quality research and not letting our biases affect the validity of our results, but we are also unapologetically positioned against the Far-Right.

Combatting Far-Right radicalisation and misinformation are central goals of our research, and hopefully the goal of anyone investigating these topics. In the case of other distressing topics (i.e. modern slavery) you will receive no pushback for this bias against your topic, but in the case of the Far-Right, you can expect to have your bias questioned. Therefore, make sure to address this issue in your introduction or methodology.

Working with the Content

5. Have a plan

Before diving into distressing content, develop a plan for what you will do, how it will function, and how you will attempt to maintain your wellbeing as a researcher. Ideally find a partner or community to team up with in your exposure to this content. Be strategic and proactive in how you enter into this content area and to what content you expose yourself.

6. Set clear boundaries

Being able to disengage from this work is essential, and understanding where your boundaries are is key to doing so. Consider choosing these preemptively. What are your boundaries around talking about this content with your support network? Are you at risk of burning out? Or triggering topics you need to stay away from? These are some examples, but there are many more to consider. Self-reflection is an essential skill when pursuing these lines of inquiry.

7. Minimise number of exposures

If you are investigating Far-Right content, keep your exposure to a minimum. Look at what is required and then stop. If you need a second or third viewing, do so, but know when to stop. In all possible ways, minimise your exposure.

8. Minimise type of exposure

If you are investigating Far-Right content, on future viewings consider muting videos or accessing transcriptions. If looking at large data sets of text, allow your research programmes to sort through the content instead of yourself, and just do the tests required to check the programmes work correctly.

9. Take breaks!

This applies to all work, but is still relevant and worth reminding here. Our brains only hold so much attention span. We all need breaks. When the content we are investigating makes us distressed or uncomfortable, we need more breaks than normal. Take them! This is perhaps the single most important tool against burnout. Take a 15 minute break between viewings of content, or even a 3 month break between papers if you need it.

Writing about the Content

10. Expect heavy criticism

All research can garner criticism, but when studying the Far-Right, authors must expect heavy criticism and plenty of it. It is far easier for the Far-Right to delegitimise your work than actually address any relevant arguments you make, and they are likely to attempt exactly that. The easiest way to prevent or proactively respond to these criticisms is to predict what they will be and address them in your work before publication. Be even more careful than usual about validity concerns, potential lines of criticism, and attempts to delegitimise or invalidate your work, because the thing you are studying wants your work to accomplish nothing.

11. Prevent the misrepresenting of your work

The alternative strategy the Far-Right might take to lessen the impact of your research is to twist it, manipulating the language you have used and framing your work as either neutral or even positive regarding the Far-Right. Similar to acknowledging your bias, it is essential when performing this work to think very carefully about the language you use and how it might be misrepresented. This is far, far easier to address preemptively than reactively, and must be taken into account during the writing and editing stages of your research outputs. If it is possible for the Far-Right to present your research as anything other than entirely opposed to their work, they will. Do not allow this.

Miscellaneous Tips and Tricks

12. Resetting your advertising algorithms

If you blow your social media algorithms all to hell (which you will!) and get stuck with insufferable far-right advertising from all corners, try googling 'best online mattress company' or 'new dining set' or even just talking about furniture and mattresses aloud. This will almost always ensure at least a few weeks of harmless furniture advertisements. Using a VPN can be incredibly useful here - though be aware it can impact your research (you might get different search results if YouTube thinks you're in Canada, for example!).

13. Don't get distracted

The advantage of working on the Far-Right or other distressing topics is that they are inherently interesting! However, this also means that it is easy to get distracted by a new line of inquiry or research question and lose focus. Keep your research as narrow as it needs to be (quite narrow) and keep an ever-expanding list of paper ideas and new things you've found that interest you. It will keep your current work as focused as it needs to be (very focused) while simultaneously providing you with excellent ideas for follow-up work or ideas to pass on to others.

14. Understand and prepare for potential harassment

The Far-Right is not a pleasant community to engage with. An unpleasant reality of researching this topic is the potential for harassment of the researchers involved and even possibly their families or loved ones. Obviously this is something we all hope will never happen, but is an undeniable risk of performing this work, and one that anyone engaging in it should be well aware of beforehand. Tom and I both have very limited social media presences for this reason, and have talked with our friends and family about this risk and how we would want to deal with it if it does happen. As with many of the tips here, this is something to prepare for preventatively and proactively instead of reactively.

The Role of Identity and Privilege

15. Consider focusing your research on oppressed identities that you do not have

Privilege is a definite resource in this work. Researching the oppression of identities you do not have allows a level of separation between your personal experiences and the societal oppression or hatred being investigated. This can allow for an easier time maintaining wellbeing as a researcher. Further, this approach can allow for heightened intersectionality in the analysis performed while still allowing personal experiences of oppression to inform or contrast against other forms of oppression.

The authors of this piece are cis white men with parental wealth as a safety net. This is a fact, and something that we believe allows us to dive into these topics with less impact on our wellbeing than others might experience. Consider studying the oppression of those with different identities than your own, but always be aware that your own positionality and privilege will mean that you miss some things and emphasise others. That's ok though - remember that objectivity is impossible! For researchers with privileged identities, the study of oppression and hatred against identities we do not have can be a form of allyship, and in the end, building communities of solidarity are the best defense we have against the far-right.

16. Alternatively, let your personal experiences inform your research

For some, the personal oppression they experience may catalyze their motivation for this work. In that case, consider this an opportunity to channel anger, frustration, anxiety, and other potentially unhelpful or unpleasant emotions into practical research. In this way, research like this can provide an outlet. There is no doubt that research is improved when informed by personal experience. However, be extremely careful when pursuing this approach that you still allow sufficient time and opportunity to disengage from these topics. Personal oppression can drive feelings of hopelessness or helplessness which can be extremely de-motivating and painful. Research can be a way to deal with those feelings, but it can also accentuate them.