

# EU DISINFOLAB 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

## Dealing with potentially disturbing digital content – avoiding trauma, guarding mental health

PANEL: “We need to talk about mental health support”

**Jochen Spangenberg**  
**DW Research & Cooperation Projects**

<https://innovation.dw.com/>



Twitter: @jos pang & @dw\_innovation

11 October 2023

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We gather. We source. We map.

EU DISINFO LAB  
We gather. We source. We map.



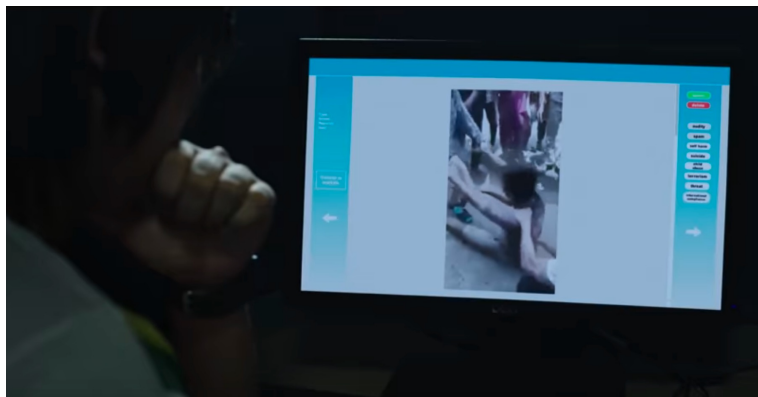
Source: Pixabay

MENTAL  
HEALTH  
MATTERS

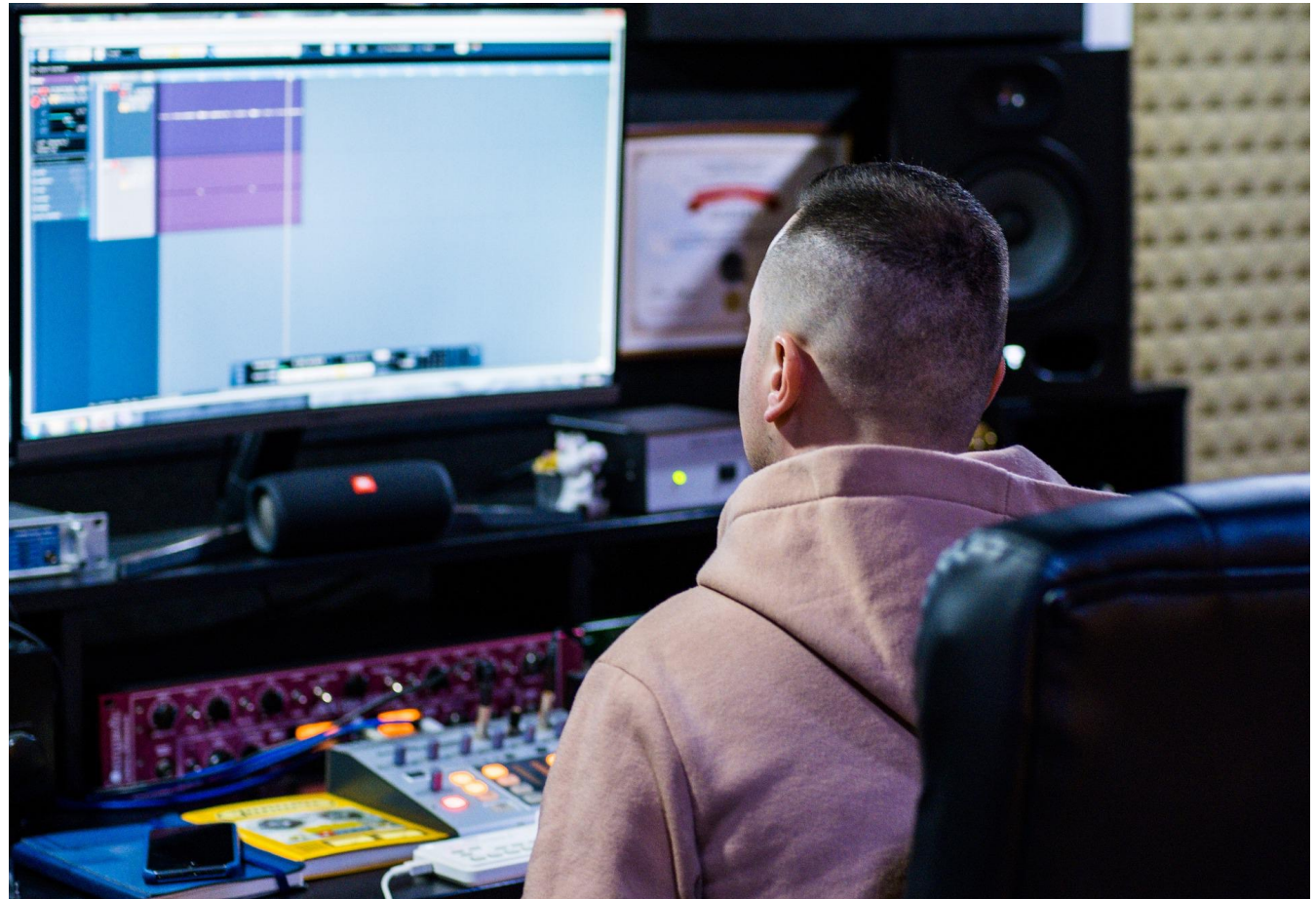
Source: Unsplash



# Reporting from the digital frontline ...



Source: Screenshots of trailer of the film "The Cleaners"



Source: Pixabay



**Russian Embassy, UK** @RussianEmbassy · 3h

Russia government organization

Replying to @XSovietNews @mfa\_russia and 9 others

No, it's the indeed pregnant 🇷🇺 beauty blogger Marianna Podgurskaya. She actually played roles of both pregnant women on the photos. And first photos were actually taken by famous propagandist photographer Evgeniy Maloletka, rather than rescuers and witnesses as one would expect.



108 1,066 2,595

Source: Tweet of Russian embassy in the UK. Screenshot taken 10 March 2022 at 15.52. Tweet has meanwhile been blocked / removed by Twitter

The New York Times

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## Satellite images show bodies lay in Bucha for weeks, despite Russian claims.

April 4, 2022  
Malachy Browne, David Bott and Haley Willis



Satellite images rebut Russia's claim that the killing of civilians in Bucha occurred after its soldiers had left town, a Times analysis found. Video contains graphic images. Maxar Technologies

Source: [New York Times](#), published 4 April 2022



**Christo Grozev** @christogrozev · 29m

Shoigu today: "Our army only hits military infrastructure with no civilians using high precision weapons"

Also Shoigu today:



10 593 1,188

Source: Screenshot of [tweet](#) by Christo Grozev (@christogrozev) taken on 1 March 2022 at 12.55 CET



Source: various / unknown



Source: Visegrad24 via X (Twitter)



## NEWS

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# Greece boat disaster: Capsized boat had 100 children in hold - reports

9 minutes ago



Europe migrant crisis



HELLENIC COAST GUARD

The Greek coastguard released images of the crowded boat before it went down

Source: [BBC](#), 15 June 2023



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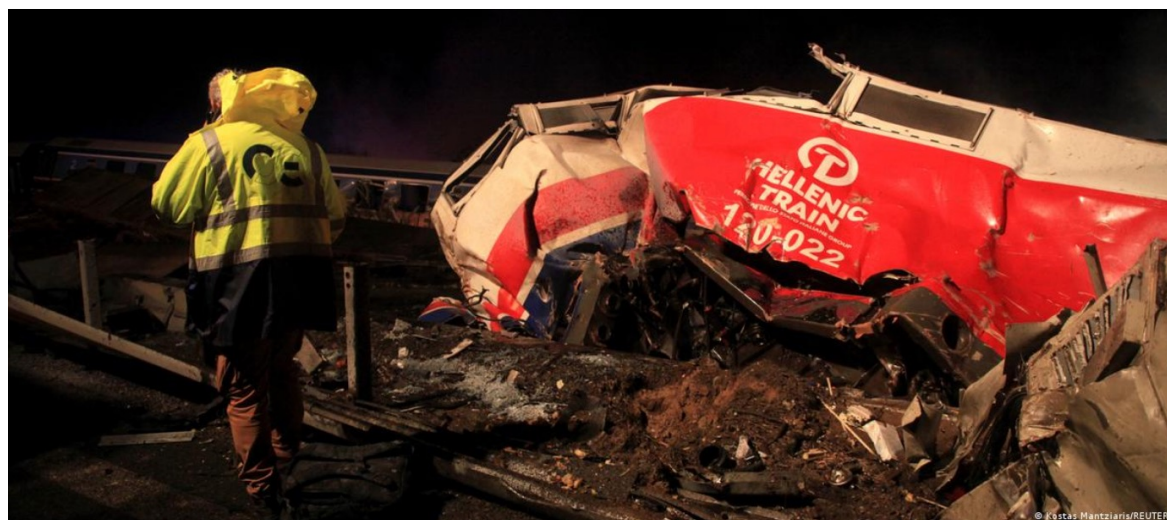


CATASTROPHE | GREECE

# Greece train crash leaves dozens dead

03/01/2023

At least 32 people have been killed in central Greece after two trains collided, with dozens more injured, according to the fire brigade.



The accident occurred in near the city of Larissa

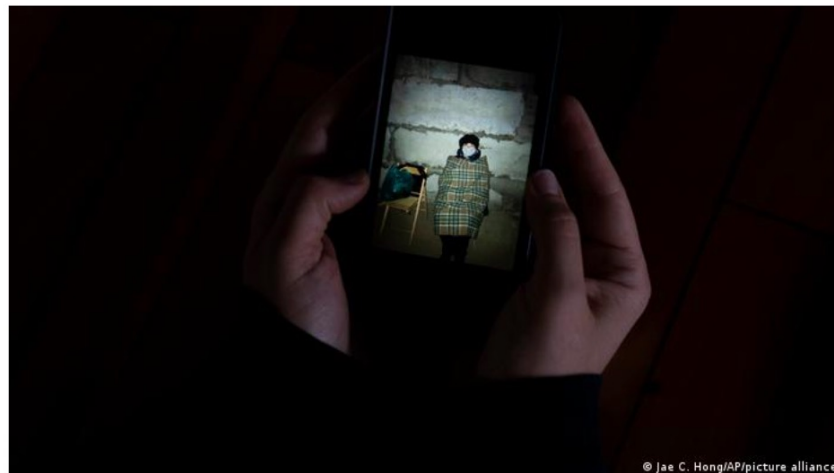
Image: Kostas Mantziaris/REUTERS

Source: [DW](#), 1 March 2023

WORLD

## How war videos on social media can trigger secondary trauma

During a war, trauma is no longer limited to the battlefield. Violent and distressing content on social media can leave a lasting impression. Here's how users can be prepared.



© Jae C. Hong/AP/picture alliance

A Ukrainian immigrant in California shows a photo of her aunt hunkering down in a basement in Kyiv, Ukraine, amid Russia's invasion

Date 09.03.2022

Author Jochen Spangenberg

Related Subjects [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Ukraine](#), [Russia's invasion of Ukraine \(2022\)](#)

Keywords [Ukraine](#), [social media](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [trauma](#), [vicarious trauma](#)

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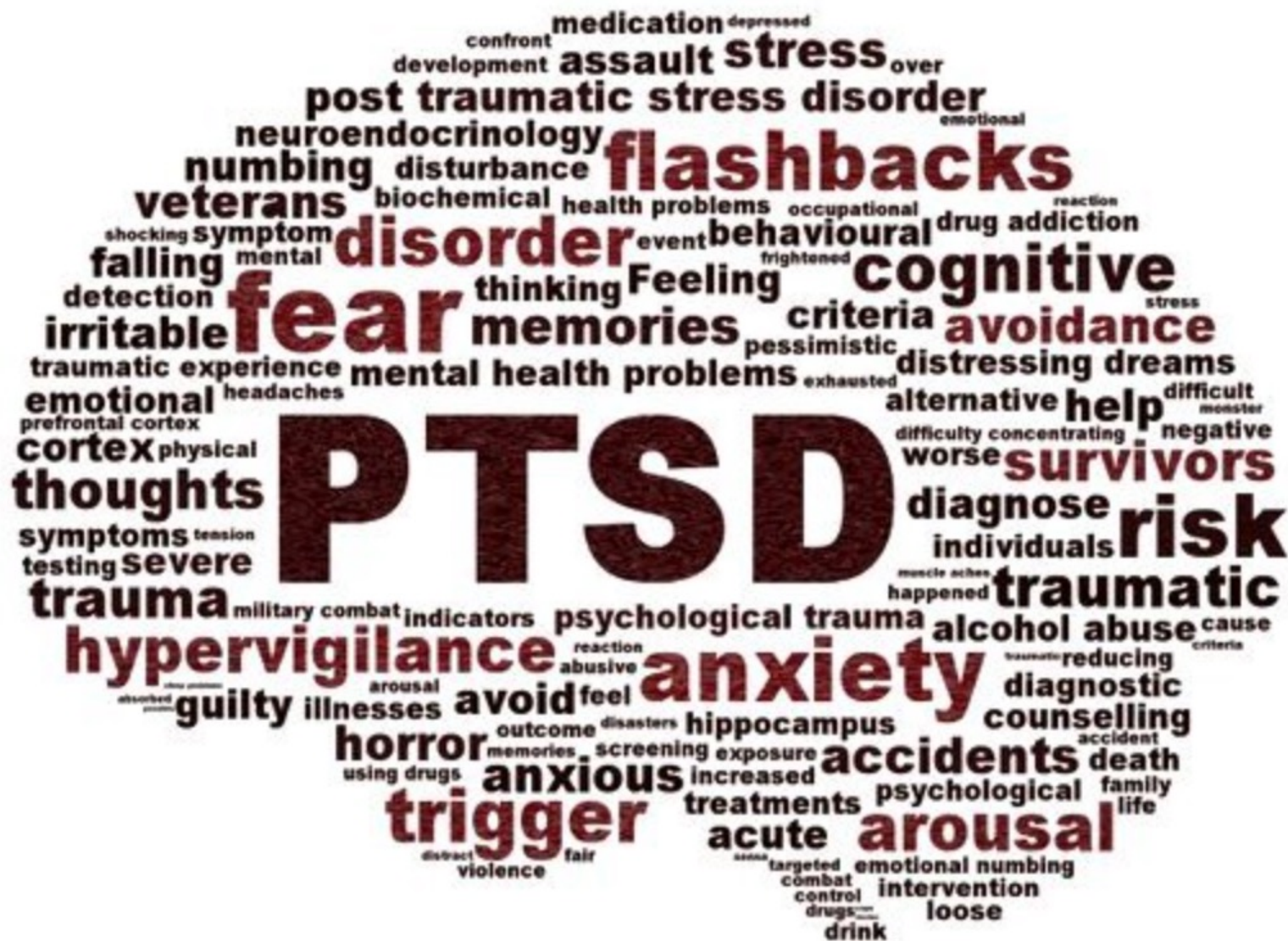
Source: [dw.com](https://www.dw.com) / Jochen Spangenberg



# My working definition of vicarious (secondary) trauma here

**A condition resulting from exposure to traumatic  
content indirectly, e.g. via screen.**

(This may involve listening to / viewing accounts of eyewitnesses or  
hearing from victims of trauma and violence.)



Source: PTSD brain cloud



# Spotting the signs of (someone) being “unwell” ...

- Excessive use of drugs / alcohol (“substance abuse”), e.g. to forget (temporarily), have no bad dreams, to sleep, etc.
- Withdrawal from social activities or engagement with colleagues
- Being increasingly introvert
- Feelings of detachment from other people
- Difficulty to relate to mundane / ordinary concerns of others
- Being short-tempered / easily irritable
- ...

*Note of caution and advice: the above can be signs, but mustn't be. They can occur in both people who directly or indirectly witnessed potentially traumatising incidents. In any case: if you feel unsure about signs and symptoms, seek professional help or refer your colleagues / friends to experts!*

# Potential measures to try and avoid or reduce secondary / vicarious trauma

1. For management
2. For digital investigators

# 1. Management





Source: Pixabay





Source: Unsplash



## 9 Ways to Fight Mental Health Stigma

Source: [NAMI](#)



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### UPFRONT

# Destigmatizing mental illness needs a national push, report says

Source: [APA](#)





Source: Pixabay

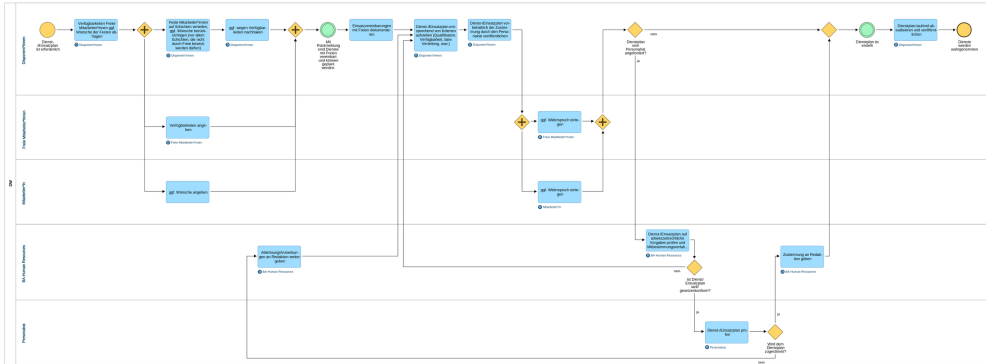


Source: Unsplash

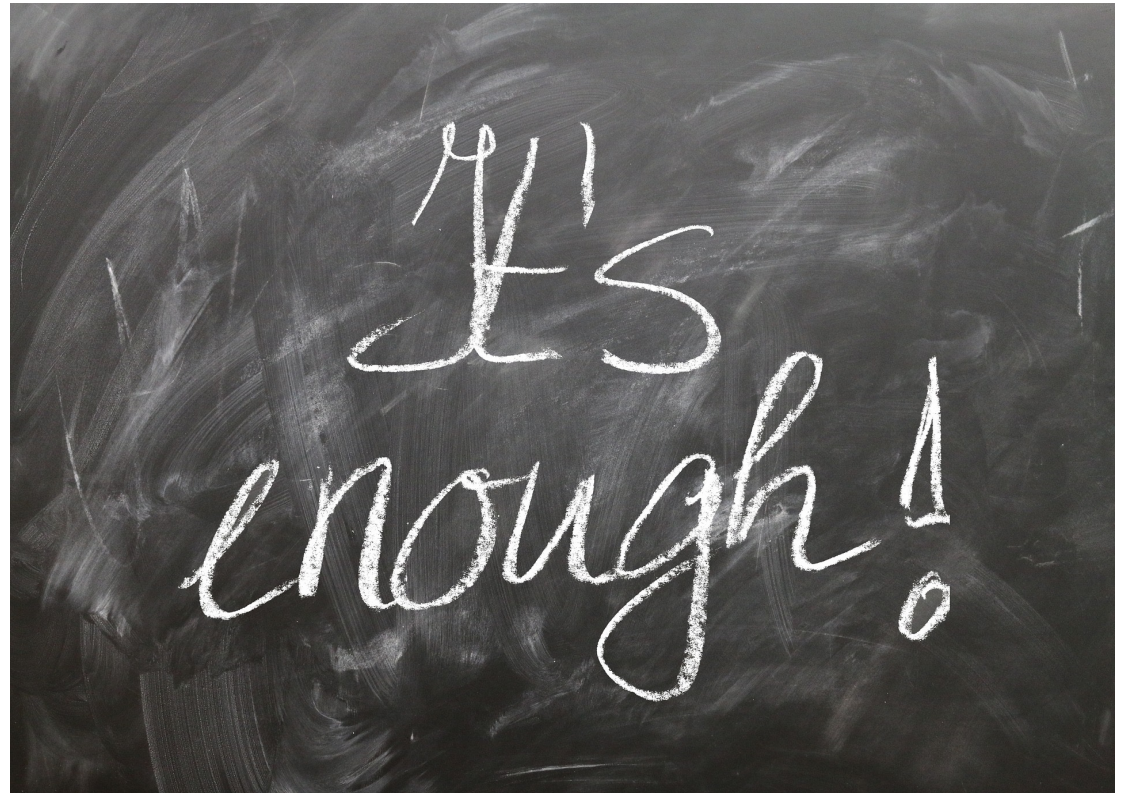


Source: Unsplash



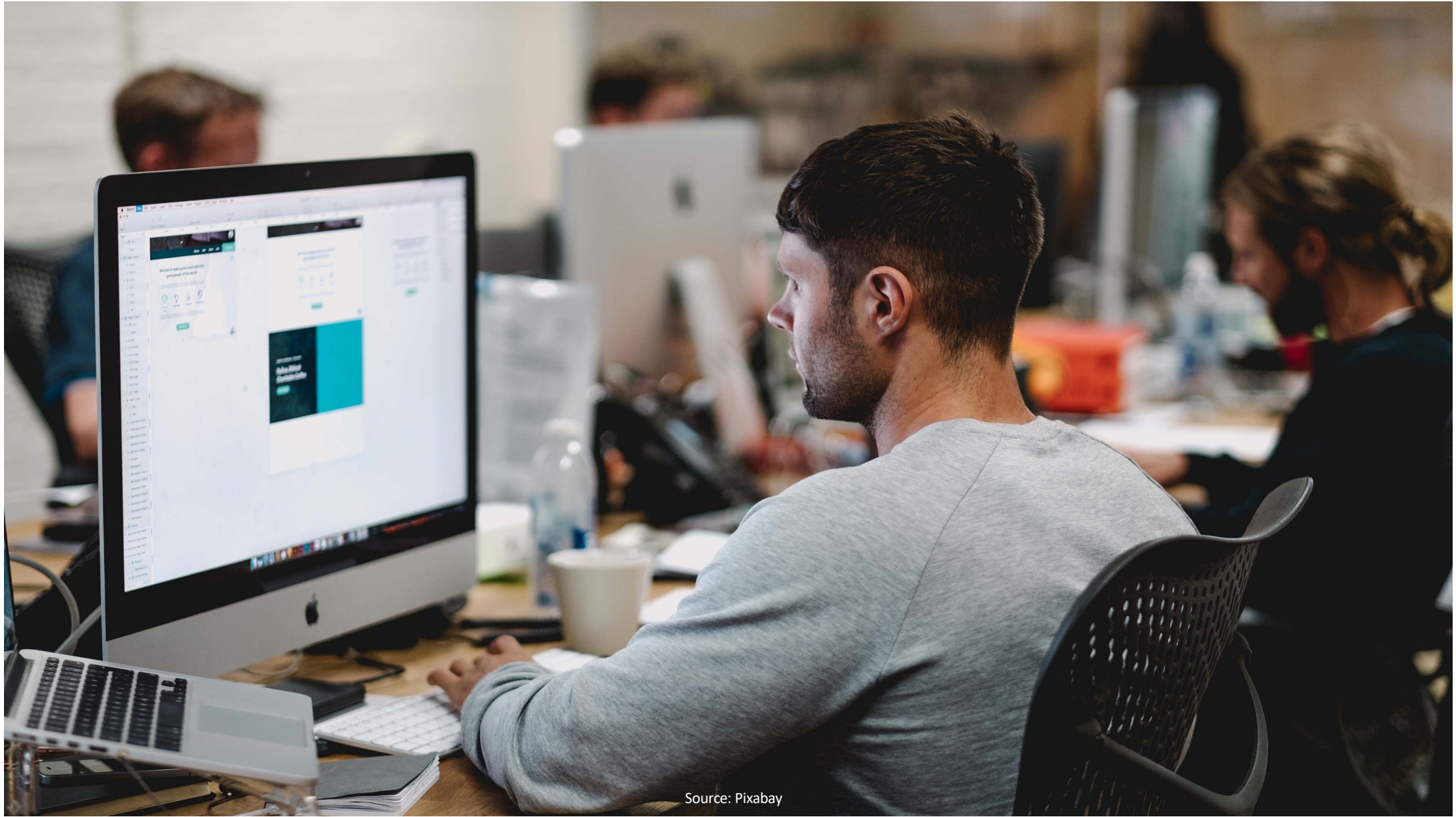


Source: Pixabay

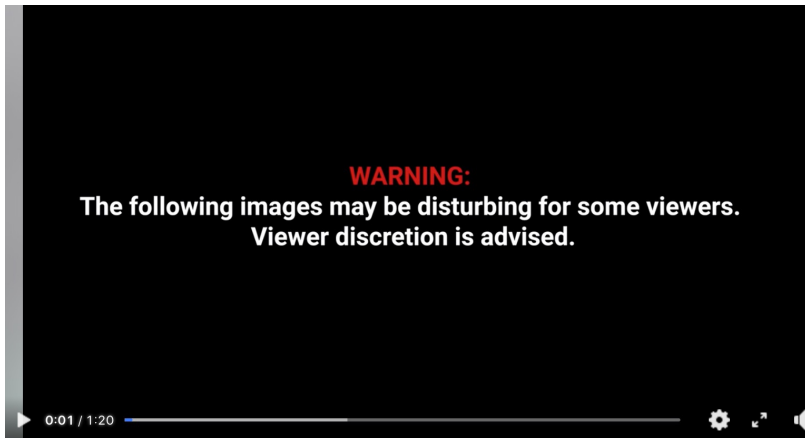
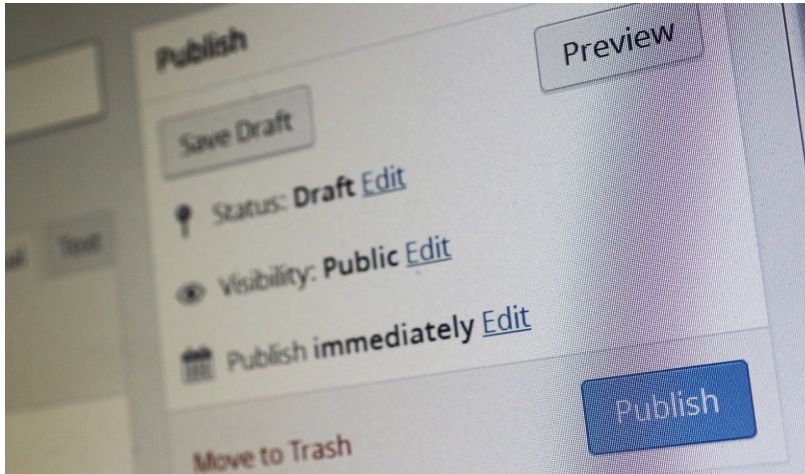


Source: Pixabay





Source: Pixabay



WARNING: This video contains graphic content and may be upsetting.



Source: Pixabay





Source: Pixabay



## 2. Digital Investigators



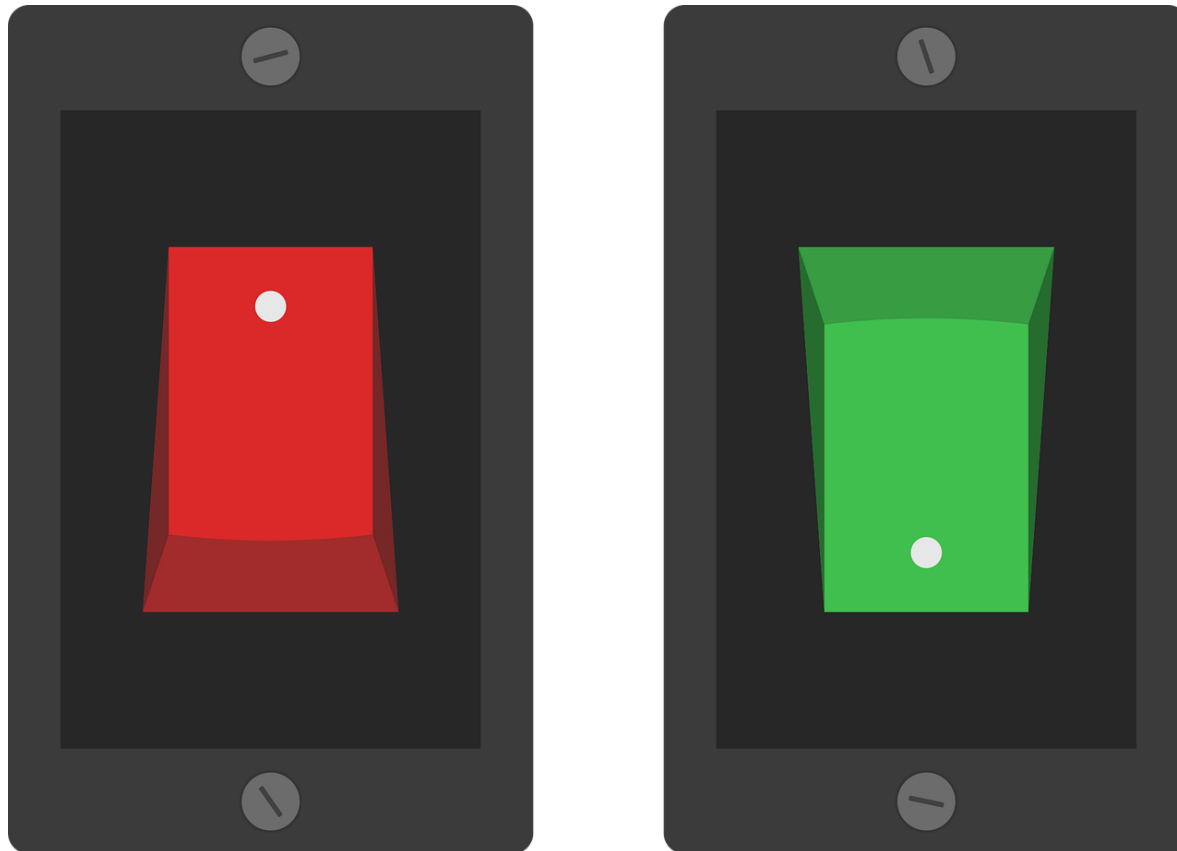
Source: Unsplash

# Be prepared & alert / up your guards



Source: Pixabay

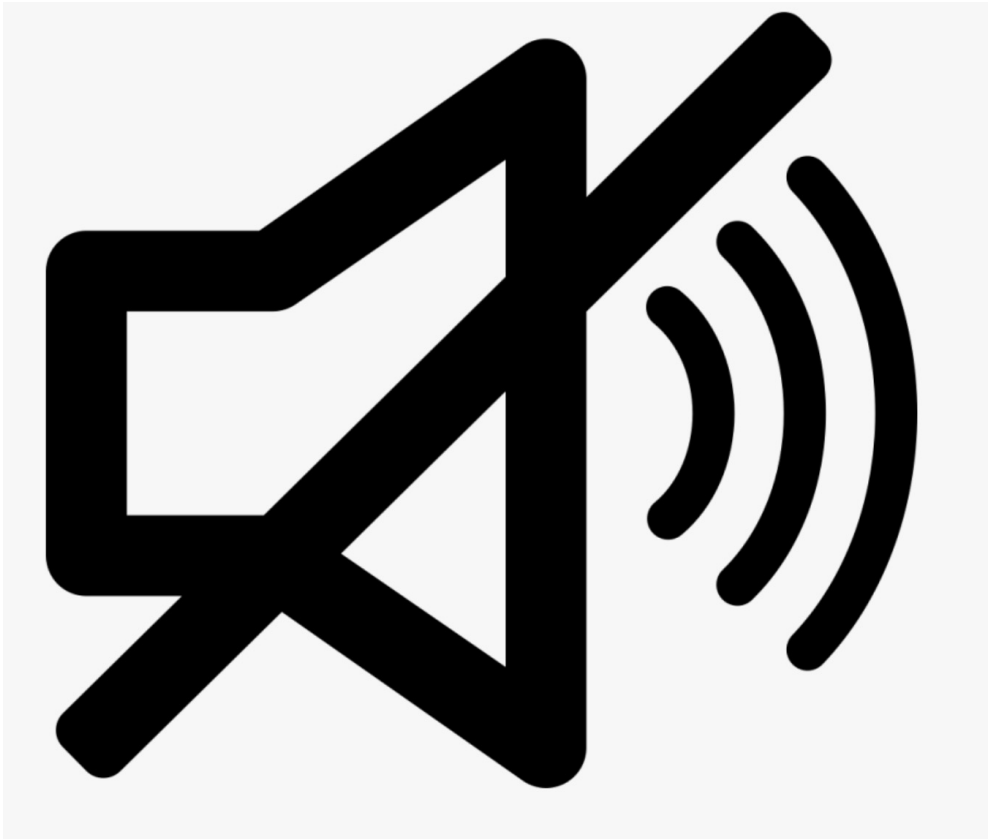
# Know your triggers



Source: Pixabay



# The power of sound

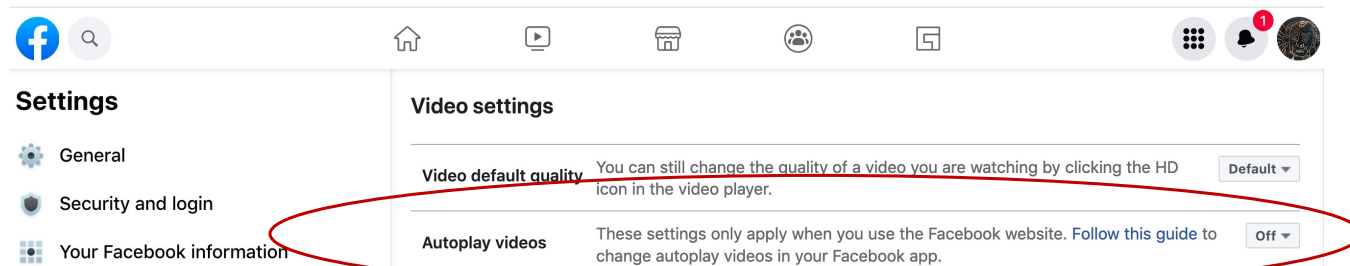
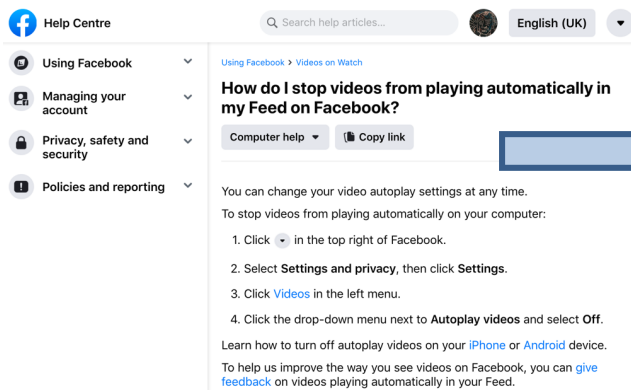


Source: Pixabay

# Dealing with video (on social)



Source: [Channel 4 video of Bucha, Ukraine, via YouTube](#)



Source: Facebook settings





Source: Unsplash



Source: Unsplash



Source: Pixabay



The thing about HOME office ...



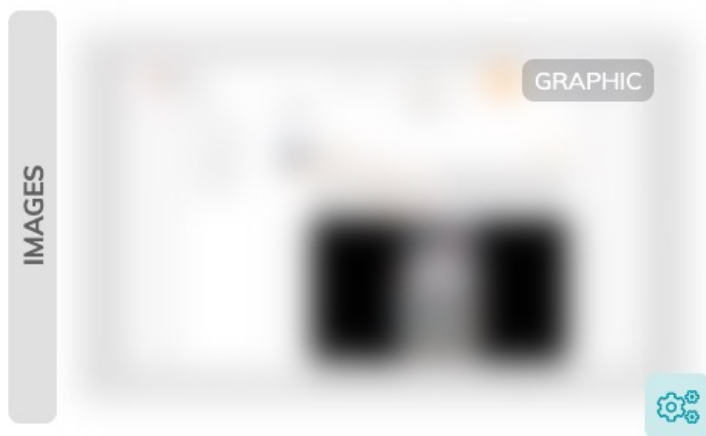
Source: Unsplash



# Protect your colleagues and your audiences



Source: Pixabay



Source: Archived image blurred and labelled as “graphic” by verification platform Truly Media



Malachy Browne  
@malachybrowne

Not true, Russia. Here's the evidence.  
[nytimes.com/2022/04/04/wor...](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/world/russia-ukraine-war.html)

This video includes scenes  
of graphic violence.

1.7M views

0:01 / 1:07

Source: [Tweet by Malachy Browne](#)



Source: Pixabay



SELF CARE

Source: Pixabay



# Talk to your bosses if necessary, address issues



Source: Unsplash

# Seek professional help if necessary



Source: Unsplash



A photograph of a calm lake at sunset. The sky is filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds, reflecting on the water's surface. In the foreground, several dark wooden posts stand vertically in the water. The background shows a dark, silhouetted shoreline with trees and some small structures. The overall mood is peaceful and tranquil.

# Brief summary

Photo: Jochen Spangenberg



MENTAL  
HEALTH  
MATTERS

Source: Unsplash



## Under Pressure: The Emotional Hazards of Being a Freelance Journalist

204 Aufrufe • 18.11.2020

5 0 TEILEN SPEICHERN



Source: Stuart D. Hughes in conversation with psychologist and trauma specialist Anthony Feinstein.  
Organised by the Rory Peck Trust for Freelance Journalists. Recording of session (18 Nov 2020) available on [YouTube](#)

Source: [Tweet exchanges](#) Jochen Spangenberg -  
Stuart D. Hughes.  
From Twitter on 18 Nov 2020





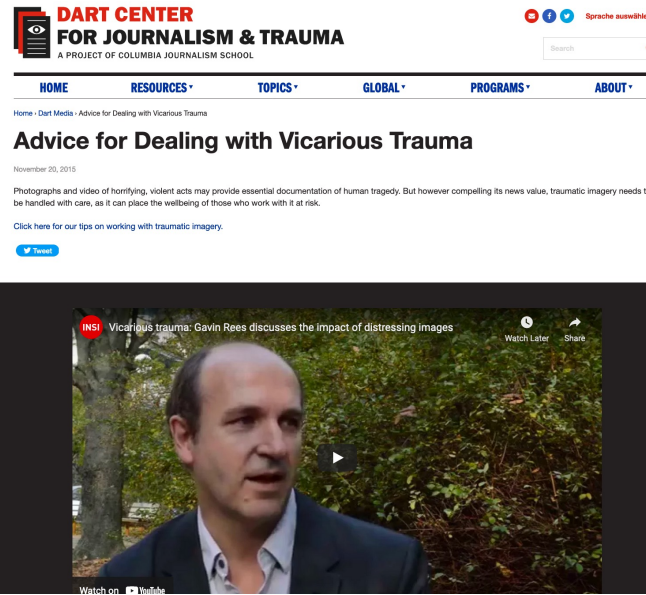
## Eyewitness Media Hub REPORT

### Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline

Sam Dubberley  
Elizabeth Griffin  
Haluk Mert Bal



Source: [Eyewitness Media Hub](#)



Source: [Dart Center](#)

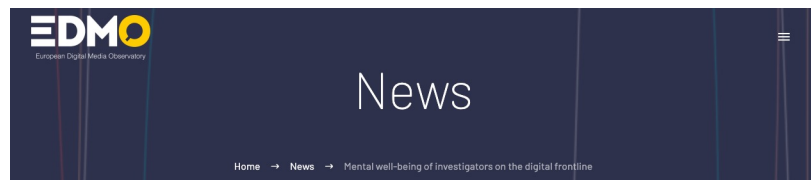


Working with  mind



Source: [Headline Network](#)





News | Ukraine | March 28, 2022

## Mental well-being of investigators on the digital frontline

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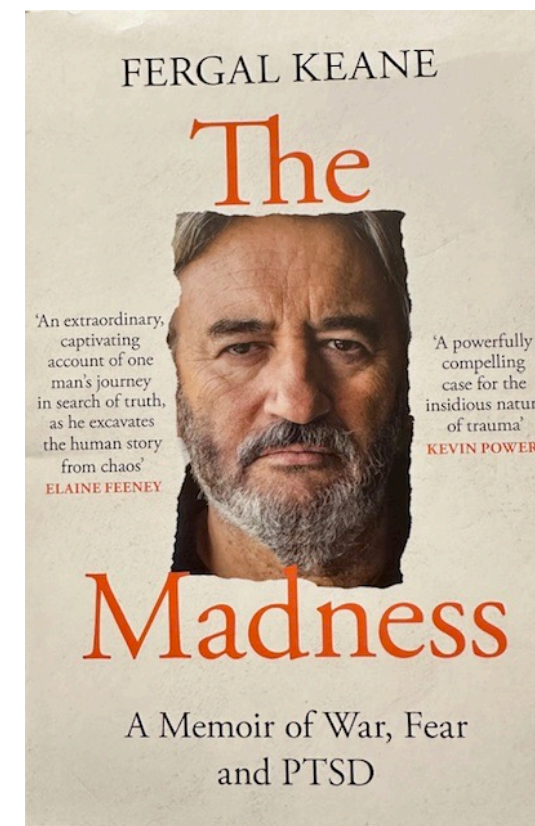
The vital role of measuring impact in media literacy initiatives

10 Recommendations by the Taskforce on Disinformation and the War in Ukraine

Mapping European media literacy initiatives in response to the war in Ukraine



Source: [Dhruvi Shah in The Guardian](#), 16 Feb 2023



Source: respective book (2022).  
Photo by Jochen Spangenberg

# More of my / our research



(a) Original



(b) Drawing



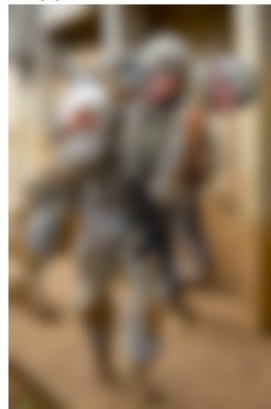
(c) Colored Drawing



(d) Painting



(e) Partial Blurring



(d) Blurring

## Mitigating Viewer Impact from Disturbing Imagery using AI Filters: A User-Study

Ioannis Sarridis<sup>a</sup>, Jochen Spangenberg<sup>b</sup>, Olga Papadopoulou<sup>a</sup> and Symeon Papadopoulos<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Centre for Research and Technology Hellas, 6th km Charilaou-Thermi Rd, Thessaloniki 57001, Greece; <sup>b</sup>Deutsche Welle, Voltastr. 6, 13355 Berlin, Germany

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Compiled July 18, 2023

### ABSTRACT

Exposure to disturbing imagery can significantly impact individuals, especially professionals who encounter such content as part of their work. This paper presents a user study, involving 107 participants, predominantly journalists and human rights investigators, that explores the capability of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based image filters to potentially mitigate the emotional impact of viewing such disturbing content. We tested five different filter styles, both traditional (Blurring and Partial Blurring) and AI-based (Drawing, Colored Drawing, and Painting), and measured their effectiveness in terms of conveying image information while reducing emotional distress. Our findings suggest that the AI-based Drawing style filter demonstrates the best performance, offering a promising solution for reducing negative feelings (-30.38%) while preserving the interpretability of the image (97.19%). Despite the requirement for many professionals to eventually inspect the original images, participants suggested potential strategies for integrating AI filters into their workflow, such as using AI filters as an initial, preparatory step before viewing the original image. Overall, this paper contributes to the development of a more ethically considerate and effective visual environment for professionals routinely engaging with potentially disturbing imagery.

### KEYWORDS

disturbing content; image style transfer; journalists; human rights investigators; mental health; artificial intelligence; gruesome imagery

In the era of digital communication there is an exponential increase in media content, with potentially disturbing and traumatizing images becoming increasingly prevalent (Dubberley, Griffin, & Bal, 2015; Reid, 2014; Zeng, 2018). This issue holds particular significance for professions such as journalism and human rights investigation, where interactions with distressing visual content are occupational inevitabilities (Dubberley et al., 2015). Such graphic visuals frequently encapsulate scenes of violence, harm, and suffering, provoking emotions of worry, concern, or anxiety that can lead to secondary or vicarious trauma (Sarridis, Koutlis, Papadopoulou, & Papadopoulos, 2022; Shah, 2023; Zampoglou, Papadopoulos, Kompatsiaris, & Spangenberg, 2016). For instance, professionals may be required to inspect footage from conflict zones such as the war in Ukraine (Spangenberg, 2022), scenes from natural disasters, or horrific accidents. Thus, it is crucial to develop and employ solutions that can effectively mitigate the viewer's impact from such disturbing imagery.

CONTACT Ioannis Sarridis. Email: gsarridis@iti.gr

Source: Research by Ioannis Sarridis, Jochen Spangenberg, Olga Papadopoulou and Symeon Papadopoulos (2023 – paper currently under review for publication)





Source: Photo by Friedrich Feuerhake



# Thank you!

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