

MARCH 2022

# Holistic Digital Security

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# Featured Panelists

## Defining Holistic Security

**Rachael Cornejo** is passionate about helping individuals and communities understand and actively participate in their own security. She is currently a cyber risk consultant. Previously, Rachael designed security tools for investigative journalists and acted as a security consultant for nonprofits through Citizen Clinic at UC Berkeley's Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity. Her work on journalist security includes a Security Evaluation Framework for OSINT Tools, published by UC Berkeley's Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity.

**Steve Trush** is the founder of West County Labs and an expert in holistic security and open source research, supporting government, academia, and the nonprofit world. Steve was one of the founding directors of UC Berkeley's Citizen Clinic, the world's first public interest cybersecurity clinic to protect civil society from digital oppression.

**Pearlé Nwaezeigwe** is a Nigerian lawyer, she obtained her LL.B from the prestigious University of Lagos and obtained her Master's in International Human Rights Law from UC Berkeley. Her interests are in human rights and technology, which led her to her former role as a Policy Manager Africa at TikTok. Her role there entailed creating inclusive policies that fosters free expression amongst users in 47 countries. Her area of expertise includes policy development, responsible innovation, policy enforcement and trust and safety. She now works with Addvert as a Brand Safety Manager.

**Alexa Koenig (Moderator)** is the Executive Director of UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center (winner of the 2015 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions) and a lecturer in the schools of law and journalism. She co-founded Berkeley's Investigations Lab, which trains students in online fact-finding methods, and directed development of the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations. Her most recent books include *Digital Witness: Using Open Source Methods for Human Rights Investigations, Advocacy and Accountability* (co-edited 2020), and *Graphic: Trauma and Meaning in our Online Lives* (co-authored, forthcoming 2023).

# Featured Panelists

## Inspiring Industry Change

**Karin Goh** was raised in Singapore and moved to California to pursue her undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley where she graduated with a computer science degree and human rights minor. She now works as a software engineer at TomoCredit and volunteers with Code Nation, teaching web development and mentoring high school students from under-represented and underserved communities.

**Leigh Honeywell** is the founder and CEO of Tall Poppy, where she helps companies protect their employees from online harassment. She was previously a Technology Fellow at the ACLU's Project on Speech, Privacy, and Technology, and also worked at Slack, Salesforce.com, Microsoft, and Symantec. She has co-founded two hackerspaces, and advises several nonprofits and startups. Leigh has a Bachelors of Science from the University of Toronto where she majored in Computer Science and Equity Studies.

**Sofia Kooner (Moderator)** is the Human Rights Center's Investigations Lab Coordinator. Sofia studied Critical Race & Ethnic Studies and Sociology with an intensive concentration in Global Information and Social Enterprise studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In her role at the Investigations Lab, Sofia supports undergraduate and graduate students managing open source investigations all over the world.

# Featured Panelists

## Managing Security Risks and Well-Being Online

**Sydney Eliot** is a fourth-year politics major at UC Santa Cruz. She is the Chief of Staff to the UCSC Student Body President and a researcher at the Human Rights Investigation Lab at UCSC. Sydney has been a member of the HR Lab for three years and hopes to pursue a career as a human rights researcher.

**Abir Ghattas** is the Information Security Director for Human Rights Watch. She provides strategic and operational oversight for managing information security risks that HRW staff face in their work. Before developing her expertise in information and digital security, Abir was the communications and outreach director for Raseef22, a PAN Arab independent media platform, and also the outreach director for Majal, a network of digital platforms centered on securing freedom of expression and Access to information.

**Nikita Gupta**, MPH, specializes in transforming trauma through healing and resiliency in educational as well as public and private settings. As a leader in the field for over 24 years, Nikita's work is rooted in practices of embodied empowerment and social healing. She is especially committed to working with helping professionals, activists, and educators in caring for themselves while caring for others. Through this work, she aims to infuse infrastructures for resilience that support us in bravely moving through the unknown, while finding joy in each day.

# Featured Panelists

**Monica Mikhail** is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology and a graduate student researcher for the Human Rights Investigations Lab at UC Santa Cruz. Her dissertation research explores processes of belonging within transnational networks of care across the Global South.

**Dr. Sylvanna M. Falcón (Moderator)** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Latin American and Latino Studies, Director of the Research Center for the Americas, and Founder and Director of the Human Rights Investigations Lab for the Americas at the University of California, Santa Cruz Professor Falcón is an award-winning author of *Power Interrupted: Antiracist and Feminist Activists inside the United Nations* (University of Washington Press, 2016 - awarded the 2016 National Women's Studies Association Gloria E. Anzaldúa Book Prize). She is the co-editor of *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship* [Rutgers University Press, 2021] and *New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights* [Routledge, 2011].



# Introduction

Human rights researchers face a combination of physical, digital, and psychosocial<sup>1</sup> risks to their well-being, their investigations, and the communities they serve.<sup>2</sup> While specific threats can evolve with technology and changes of context, the relevance of these three categories of harm should no longer be a surprise to anyone in this field. Human rights investigators now frequently collect and analyze information discovered through the internet, especially user-generated content on social media, some of which may reveal sensitive facts that put the poster or those depicted at risk, or be quite graphic, raising risks for the investigator and others. As a result, leaders in open source investigations have, for years, called for researchers to start putting in place protective practices, including “mitigat[ing] the risk of viewing distressing content [as] an important part of building a response to mental health risks and to promoting sustainable human rights practices.”<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 2022, The Research Center for the Americas at UC Santa Cruz and the Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley School of Law convened a series of experts in a public event titled “Holistic Security and Early Career Human Rights Researchers: Inspiring Industry Change.” While there has been increased awareness of the physical, digital and psychosocial risks of modern-day human rights investigations in recent years, this convening focused on how both individuals and organizations could improve their understanding of “holistic security” and apply that knowledge via processes and practice, particularly in the workplace. The shortcomings in

1 The term psychosocial encompasses the social as psychological nature of this work.

2 Dubberley, Sam, Alexa Koenig, and Daragh Murray, eds. *Digital Witness: Using open source information for human rights investigation, documentation, and accountability*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2020: 271 - 272.

3 *Ibid*, 291.



awareness and implementation within the research community was highlighted by Dr. Alexa Koenig during the event:

“I’m often surprised when we train professional investigators, whether legal investigators or investigative reporters, at how foreign this concept of holistic security actually is. Most of them are familiar with the concept of physical security and have had some degree of training in it and have different protocols in place - that was the most familiar. With the digital security piece, they’re often aware that it’s important, but they’re often not aware of just how many digital traces that they leave when they start to do investigations online and how information is monitored and tracked. Third is the psychosocial piece - we often get a response unlike the other two, just wholesale pushback, like ‘I’m a hard working crime investigator or an investigative reporter who has been doing this work for decades. I don’t need that stuff because I can handle it.’”

This report summarizes important highlights from this event and provides additional information and resources that investigators and human rights practitioners can use to strengthen their own physical, digital and psychosocial security.

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“I have always felt that compassion and a holistic approach was missing from security work.”

**A. Ghattas**

# What is Holistic Security?

The concept of holistic security has been popularized since at least the 1990s, particularly in the field of cybersecurity. While this concept usually references managing the risk of interconnected systems as a whole, recent understanding among human rights defenders tends to focus on the connected risks of the physical, digital, and psychological realm.

A simple definition is provided by Tactical Tech, a Berlin-based activist collective that published *Holistic Security: A Strategy Manual for Human Rights Defenders* in 2016, stating that “rather than looking separately at the importance of our digital security, psycho-social well-being and organizational security processes, [holistic security] attempts to integrate them and highlight their interrelatedness.” A holistic approach to security is centered on “well-being”: ensuring that human rights defenders are physically and emotionally healthy and can sustain themselves to do this challenging work.

The concept of holistic security helps us to move past the unhelpful and mistaken belief that we can separate our digital and “real” lives and that we are unaffected by traumatic content, especially when it is viewed at a distance from where the content originated. These myths were never actually true and holding onto them can be especially damaging to historically marginalized individuals. In the following sections, we summarize the core take away points from each of three panels, to illustrate how and why these myths are not true, and even damaging, and how people can better protect themselves from harm.

4 Lichtenstein, S. “Internet security policy: a holistic and organisational approach.” In 2nd Joint Conference Proceedings AUG 96/APWWW Conference, vol. 96. AUG, 1996.

10 5 Tactical Technology Collective. *Holistic Security: A Strategy Manual for Human Rights Defenders*. Available at: <https://holistic-security.tacticaltech.org/> (accessed 20 May 2022), 2016.

**A holistic security practitioner understands that “well-being” is highly subjective and influenced by our identities, communities, beliefs, context, and experiences.**

Tactical tech’s holistic security manual is available at [holistic-security.tacticaltech.org](https://holistic-security.tacticaltech.org)

## Holistic Security

△ **Physical Security**  
Threats to our physical integrity. Threats to our homes, buildings, vehicles.

△ **Psycho-social Security**  
Threats to our psychological wellbeing.

△ **Digital Security**  
Threats to our information, communication and equipment.

— Holistic security analysis, strategies and tactics.

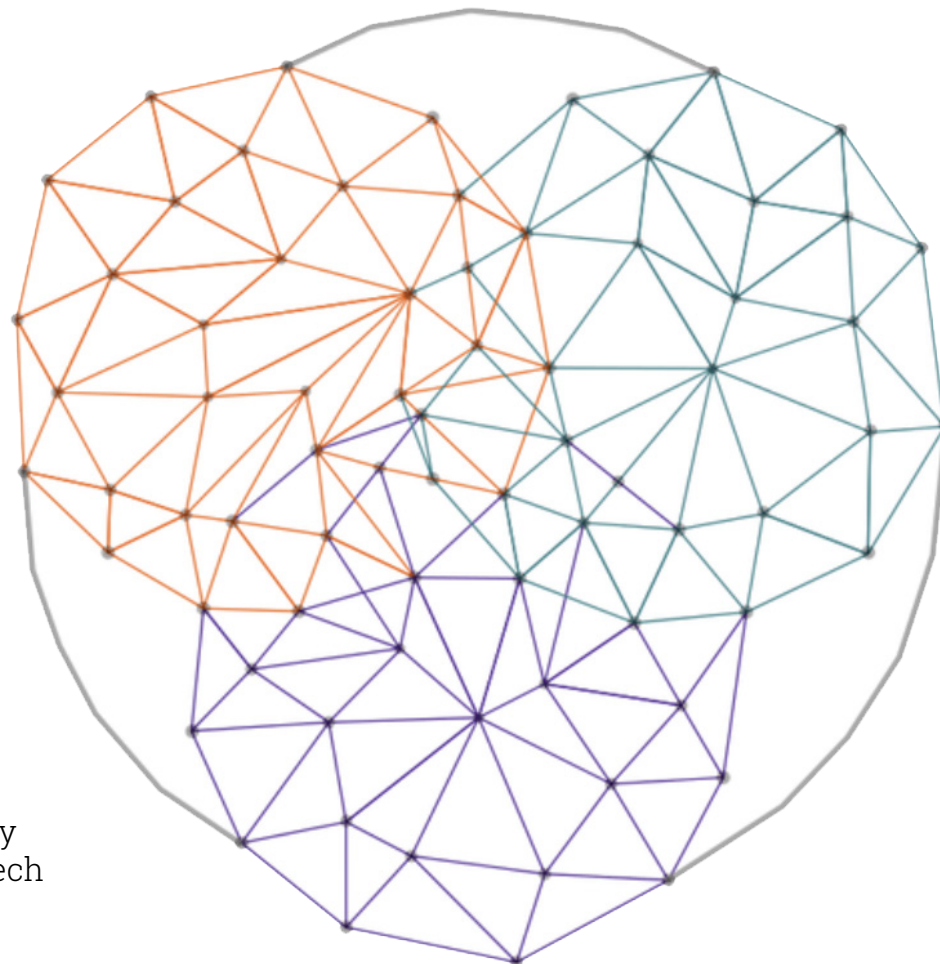


Diagram by  
Tactical Tech

# Panel One: Defining Holistic Security

**Steve Trush:** Owner & Founder of West County Labs

**Rachael Cornejo:** Consultant, Cyber & Strategic Risk

**Pearlé Nwaezeigwe:** Product Policy Manager SSA at TikTok

**Alexa Koenig (Moderator):** Executive Director of the Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley

Our first panel focused on defining holistic security and exploring what its concepts may look like in practice. Trush, one of the founding directors of UC Berkeley's Citizen Clinic—the world's first public interest cybersecurity clinic—is an expert in holistic security supporting government, academia, and nonprofits. Drawing on the university and work experience in digital investigations, Rachael Cornejo and Pearlé Nwaezeigwe offer critical insights into how to engage in this work ethically and with clarity.

## **Holistic security is essential for ethical, safe investigative work**

Our panelists discussed the need for holistic security concepts to be practiced by both student and professional investigators. Particularly overlooked in human rights research is the importance of psychosocial well-being and mental resilience even in programs that may emphasize digital and operational security, despite these components of security being interrelated. Steve Trush emphasized how digital security threats can increase in volume and impact during times of intense emotional stress and physical separation, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused individuals to have less ability to identify attacks, such as phishing emails.

“Vicarious Trauma is defined as profound negative changes in one’s fundamental beliefs about the world due to a build up of emotional residue from trauma exposure. [It] is experienced by human rights workers, activists and other helping professionals who support trauma survivors. It can increase urgency, foster feelings of self-doubt, and cement hopelessness about the future.”

## **N. Gupta**

Furthermore, many threats facing today’s human rights researchers and advocates do not fall into well-defined categories such as “cybersecurity threat” or “physical threat,” since the information environment requires researchers and activists to regularly view and engage with traumatic content online, where physical and digital threats may be inextricably entwined. Cornejo explained how investigators at the Human Rights Center are encouraged and guided on how to safely engage with potentially harmful content, particularly to be able to maintain one’s well-being and to conduct such difficult work over a long period of time.

Nwaezeigwe provided examples where this endurance was especially important to her work, such as when reviewing graphic user-generated content during the George Floyd-inspired protests of 2020, other violence against the Black Lives Matter movement, and crises in her home country of Nigeria. Nwaezeigwe related how reports of mental health decline during those investigations were tied to vicarious trauma caused by researchers and activists reviewing videos that showed violence and trauma happening to others. The perpetual need for human rights advocacy requires protective measures: “There are so many valid tragedies going on around the world and the need to continue activism still exists - we still need to speak out online” said Nwaezeigwe.

**Protective practices may focus on the individual or the collective, may range from self-care to professional support, and should not erase the individual's beliefs, experiences & values.**

Cornejo and Nwaezeigwe shared several examples of strategies that investigators, researchers and advocates can use to reduce the impact of harmful content. These strategies were learned and shared at the Human Rights Center, as well as via the development of their non-profit Rated R for Resilience ([ratedresilient.com](https://ratedresilient.com)), and practiced in their current professional roles. Cornejo stressed personal mitigations, such as being intentional with the time and venue for viewing violent or sensitive content by maintaining boundaries, such as “don’t look at [upsetting content] late at night,” “don’t look at it in your bedroom”, and “change your settings so that you’re only getting notifications at certain times.”

Nwaezeigwe elaborated that consumers of violent content should regularly ask themselves whether and how they are considering and safeguarding their mental health: “If you’re watching a horrific video, do you have to watch it completely? Is it better if you just read the news instead? Or an example is basically, you know, not watching a horrific, horrific video while you’re on your bed.”

Beyond toolkits that share those recommendations, Rated R also shares resources for professional help that was curated by therapists who understand intersectionality, especially the experiences of women of color. Nwaezeigwe shared how Rated R organizes and promotes community events and group check-ins to build additional support and stave off the loneliness of doing this work, especially during the pandemic.

Trush emphasized that protections should not just be the responsibility of an individual but that organizational leadership has to be bought-in to make holistic security protections a part of the organization. Leaders need to recognize how gender, race, and class identities impact the frequency and severity of threats to certain members of an organization differently and tailor responses with that variability in mind.

Responses such as contacting law enforcement or a corporate human resources office can be less effective or even dangerous for particular employees. Additionally, organizations need to understand that protections need to be integrated with the understanding that new vulnerabilities may be introduced at later time points. Trush also discussed how organizations may use physical security protections that include internet-enabled technology that may introduce new threats to employee's digital security, underscoring that when "adding one protection, you have to consider its impact and vulnerabilities to other aspects of your organization."

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To learn more about Rated R for Resilient and access their resources for activists, visit the website: [ratedresilient.com](https://ratedresilient.com)

## **Building holistic security processes helps protect more than an organization's own members.**

While most organizations now understand the importance of digital security resources for employees, they should also provide their employees with mental health resources and training for psychosocial resiliency. Nwaezeigwe stated that “[for companies] the psychosocial seems like an afterthought.” She suggested that they should incorporate material on resiliency as early as the onboarding process, when employees might be learning other security standards and information, for example on how to keep their devices safe.

Beyond protecting one's own team, holistic security practice helps to protect those outside an organization, such as the communities for which one advocates, research subjects, and system users. Psychosocial safety measures have been especially necessary for social media platforms sharing user-generated content, including at companies such as Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and TikTok. Media reports and recent legal settlements establish that users and employees can both suffer negative impacts after viewing violent content.

Both Cornejo and Nwaezeigwe stated how they have shared strategies learned at the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center with other students and security professionals, showing how experiences in an educational environment can have a ripple effect. Trush hopes the opportunity for those experiences can grow: “There's still very few places to develop these strategies in a controlled and managed environment - the activist and journalism communities have largely learned and gained this experience through blood and tears.”

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# Panel Two: Inspiring Industry Change

**Karin Goh:** Senior Software Engineer  
of TomoCredit


**Leigh Honeywell:** CEO and co-founder  
of Tall Poppy

**Sofia-Lisett Kooner (Moderator):**  
Lab Coordinator of the  
Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley

Holistic security requires understanding that an individual's wellness is subjective and so organizations must address how individual identities and experiences can change the impact and frequency of threats and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to safety.

Key to creating this safe environment is having a diverse, inclusive workplace that actively supports under-represented people given the likelihood of greater harm against them. In our second panel, we welcomed two panelists to discuss systemic challenges of representation in the corporate world.





## **Individuals should look for signs of an inclusive workplace before being hired.**

Leigh Honeywell and Karin Goh discussed how job applicants should investigate the diversity and inclusivity of any prospective workplace prior to being hired. Today's companies, especially larger firms, are increasingly publishing demographic and diversity data online. Using this data and other information found on the internet, job applicants may be able to investigate the representation of their identity within any desired roles compared to other organizations. Within the interview process, applicants should be observing the representation among interviewers and potential managers while paying attention to the language and other indicators of an inclusive culture.

Beyond listening to comments that a company wants to hire women or appreciates a certain identity, jobseekers should ask about the actual internal practices that support under-represented people after the hiring process such as ensuring equal advancement and pay increases. Goh emphasized that those questions should be asked of current employees at multiple levels and roles as answers may vary depending on whether one is a manager or individual contributor.

Learn more about how  
Salesforce is closing the  
equal pay gap:  
<https://sforce.co/3CzhgGe>

## **Companies can be proactive about retaining under-represented talent.**

Honeywell believes that organization leaders must pay attention to “promotion velocity,” asking internally whether their organization is promoting under-represented people at the same rate as everyone else. If there are situations where senior staff does not have any women, identifying where representation drops off is essential. Even when companies may begin an initiative to hire women straight out of boot camps, there needs to be attention to ensuring their careers do not stall at early or later stages. Also, companies must investigate to see whether pay increases are also happening at the same rate for under-represented talent.

Goh feels that looking at these inequalities is important, citing the success of her former workplace Salesforce’s Equal Pay initiative, but that workplaces also need to dig deeper into whether women and other under-represented people are seeing career growth in the roles that they actually desire. For example, while a company may invest in developing women managers, they need to consider that not all women want to be managers but want to grow as individual contributors while avoiding being pushed into certain roles due to their identity.

Honeywell and Goh both see companies increasing their theoretical understanding of unconscious bias and training employees on how to apply that knowledge when hiring and managing. Interviewer training can help employees focus on core competencies needed for open positions and understand systemic disadvantages facing people applying to those roles. Management roles should also require, through training and experience, competency in understanding bias and navigating interpersonal issues related to identity. Success in maintaining an inclusive workplace needs to be more important than longevity at a company when promoting people into management roles.

**The reality is that under-represented people still must take steps to advocate for themselves within the workplace.**

Honeywell and Goh both stated that finding a supportive set of peers and senior colleagues is essential for under-represented workers to determine the best ways to approach workplace issues. Having such a group of people in your corner can provide critical validation or support during any mistreatment and when making decisions to leave a company. While no one should tolerate being mistreated and those who are would ideally seek employment elsewhere, requirements such as visas can prevent people from leaving positions as soon as they would want.

Goh particularly feels women need to identify strong advocates within their teams or learn how to advocate for themselves, pointing out that “mentorship” differs from “sponsorship.” While several people within an organization may provide advice on career advancement, fewer are willing to “stick their necks out” for under-represented employees during unfair work situations.

# Panel Three: Managing Security Risks & Well-Being Online

**Abir Ghattas:** Director of Information Security  
at Human Rights Watch

**Nikita Gupta:** Resiliency Expert and Trainer

**Monica Mikhail and Sydney Eliot:** UC Santa Cruz students

**Sylvanna Falcón (Moderator):** Director of the Research  
Center for the Americas at UC Santa Cruz

The final panel featured both an information security and a resiliency expert to highlight the threats facing digital investigators from under-represented communities and ways to counter some of those challenges by intentionally integrating restoration practices. This panel included an overview of restoration and well-being modules created by Nikita Gupta with UC Santa Cruz students Monica Mikhail, Sydney Eliot, and Sophia Smith. Dr. Sylvanna Falcón of UC Santa Cruz also provided input into the design of modules in partnership with Dr. Alexa Koenig of UC Berkeley.

## Working in a Safe Manner

As the Director of Information Security for Human Rights Watch, Abir Ghattas noted both the excitement and demands of working in this field, with dedicated researchers covering human rights violations across the globe. Ghattas discussed how HRW approaches safety: by conducting a threat assessment of various possible scenarios with a goal of ensuring that both the people doing the research and those impacted by the research are safe, the work is protected, the information being collected is dealt with safely, and that the organization as a whole is secure.



“[When I first started], I always felt that compassion and the kind of holistic approach [to security being discussed at this webinar] was missing from this [work].”

Ghattas noted that we have better security when we bring together a sense of compassion, with talking to staff and colleagues, with conducting thorough assessments of the research or investigation environment. She noted that a major practice disregarded in security circles is “care work,” a practice Ghattas feels should be “front and center in... policies and procedures and tools and configurations.”

She said, “There’s not one solution or like one check box or one checklist that will make you more secure and more safe on how to do things.” According to Ghattas, we must educate ourselves at every opportunity, to mitigate and explain the risks involved. As she stated, “our adversaries are only getting better at what they do, they have way more resources, they have way more people, they have more money, basically.” And therefore, not only is compassion important, but so is creativity. “We need to be more creative in the ways we prepare ourselves, our organizations, our staff on how to detect and assess risks, and then respond and mitigate.”

Consistency is also key to security. While organizations often implement technical configurations to safeguard people and data, the human consistency factor is too often missing, which can lead to significant consequences when things go wrong.

## The Adversarial Threat Has Evolved

Ghattas noted how “the threat landscape is always evolving,” with adversaries having significant resources, financing, and motivation to thwart human rights investigations—often more than human rights researchers have for protection and prevention. The speed of these attacks is also very concerning, and getting increasingly sophisticated. Two key questions Ghattas thinks about in her line of work on a daily basis are the following:

- How can we reduce the attack surface against a person or an organization?
- How can you make it as hard as possible and ultimately very expensive for those who want to attack or compromise a person or an organization?

As she notes, in comparison to five years ago, “there’s an increased awareness of the huge impact that human rights investigators and researchers can have when they use technology and public data for their work. And with this increase [in awareness], comes an increase in being targeted, whether by the government, whether by semi state actors, or whether just by random people.”

“The threat landscape is always evolving.”

**A. Ghattas**






Human rights investigators have to be mindful of both their digital security and their physical security. They also have to be mindful about the data they collect, and conscious of the data they share online, including preservation, who has access to the data and sharing it, and the digital tools being used. Whenever using digital tools, it is important to ask who created the tools and who knows you're using those tools.

According to Ghattas, practicing a holistic approach to security, whether it's information or physical or operational, is very important for the integrity of the work and the well-being of the investigator. As she noted, investigators and researchers work with intense imagery all day long and there is now an increased acknowledgement of how important it is to be psychologically okay when working with distressing content, and to adopt strategies to mitigate harm to the researchers themselves. Diligence is needed to do the work well and not burn out or make mistakes due to being overworked.

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## **Top digital security tips for human rights researchers and investigators**

- Use unique passwords and don't reuse them
- Use a password manager
- Turn on multi-factor authentication for all online accounts
- Backup all critical material
- Delete material if you don't need it any longer to reduce unnecessary risks

## **Threats differ based on Immigration Status, Gender, Race, and Ethnicity.**

Ghattas maintains that not all digital security threats are experienced the same by or have the same impact on researchers, and for these reasons, we have to adopt a multi-layered approach to the subject of digital security. In addition, our online behavior and how we interact with the internet, whether for work or personal purposes, is informed by many factors, including gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and language, to name a few. As a result, according to Ghattas, digital threats can differentially impact people.

When considering gender, for example, those dynamics online reinforce or even amplify the social, economic, political and other power dynamics in the offline world. Ghattas urged the audience to consider the axis of power structure, as well as how digital threats can permeate into the offline world. For example, if you are a woman or a female-identifying investigator, security threats do not stop when you go offline; you may be at increased risk of death threats, physical attacks, and other harms.

Risk factors must be assessed repeatedly. A human rights researcher is much more secure if they are part of an organization than if they work alone. In general, an organization will have more security resources and protocols than an independent researcher. Threats and attacks can shift from the professional realm to one's personal life. If an attacker spreads disinformation and rumors on social media platforms, that discrediting can have horrible and devastating effects. And if the attacker is from the same country as the investigator, then the investigator may be at greater risk of being tracked physically or harassed offline.

Any escalation of threats, including doxxing, can also impact one's social circle, including family members and co-workers. Such threats cause high levels of stress for everyone from the investigator to those around them. Thus, it remains critical to consistently assess and address the threats facing a digital investigator, and engage in holistic security practices, in order to protect peoples' physical and psychological well being, as well as their research.

## Tips and Advice for Holistic Security

According to Ghattas, it is important to always “think about your data, where it is located, and who has access to [it].” Too often, people have access to sensitive data when they don’t need it. She said to always ask, “do they need access to this data?” If the answer is no, then their access should be removed.

Always consider what data needs to be kept online and where it should be stored, identifying who will have access. As Ghattas stated, “Not everybody is going to be targeted by million dollar malware. But everybody shares a lot of information. And everybody’s data is going to be found in a leak somewhere that might be used by an actual threat actor or hackers because it’s actually less risky to steal this kind of [digital] data than to break in [to some physical space] somewhere and steal it.”

## Mitigating the Effects of Trauma Exposure

In the final presentation, Gupta, Mikhail, and Eliot addressed the third prong of holistic security—psychosocial security—by introducing new online restoration and well-being modules that had resulted from a months-long collaboration with Gupta, UC Santa Cruz, and UC Berkeley.

Gupta, a long-time resiliency expert and the lead author of the modules explained that “Human rights work wouldn’t be possible without you, without your heart, without your body, without your mind, and without your labor.” Based on Gupta’s experience, too often activists, advocates, and others are exposed to trauma and violence daily and become at elevated risk for adverse health effects from such exposure without even realizing that increased risk. As she cautions:

“The trauma that we see in our work has similar psycho-physiological effects in our bodies [from when we watch a horror movie]. And this manifests... in our thoughts, our emotions and our

physical sensations. And then as that gets internalized and experienced, it comes out in the form of our behaviors. And so with repeated trauma exposure, we’re constantly reminded that the world can be a very dark place, it can shift our outlook on the possibilities for goodness in our life, and make us forget what joy feels like—and leave us disconnected from our purpose, leading to career burnout, and so on.”

Working in high-paced environments that address urgent matters can even affect our security (i.e., leading researchers to cut corners on security protocols) and diminish overall job performance. “We are resilient by nature and by the design of our body,” said Gupta, and therefore, implementing “simple strategies [can] mitigate the effects of trauma exposure.” Mobilizing and working directly with our nervous system can heal and replenish us, and even help to “discharge the emotional residue and the mental challenges that are part of human rights work.”

# Building an Infrastructure of Restoration

Building infrastructures for restoration in our professional spheres depends on self-care and a focus on well-being, including finding ways to be more grounded and more present. Working together in community can also enhance our sense of belonging and reduce the isolation that can be characteristic of digital investigation work.

The **Restoration and Capacity Building Modules** ([restorerresilience.life](http://restorerresilience.life)) center on strategies focused for restoring the nervous system. The modules include practices that honor one's current state and whatever tensions are located in our bodies. The toolkit is designed to help restore vitality, by focusing on breath, shifting mindsets, and deepening connection to well-being and community.

## **The digital toolkit is structured around four units:**

**Unit 1:** Reducing Secondary Trauma through Grounding Practices

**Unit 2:** Self-Soothing to Ease Your Nervous System

**Unit 3:** Honoring your Purpose and Releasing Excess Urgency

**Unit 4:** Alleviating Isolation and Fostering Community Care

## **The Importance of Restoration Work for Students and Early Career Investigators**

Eliot, who has been a student researcher in the Human Rights Investigations Lab at UC Santa Cruz since 2019, said “I think it’s really important for students and early career human rights investigators to know the importance of resiliency and taking care of themselves so that they have the tools to continue the work.” Hoping that the toolkit offers additional support for digital investigators, Eliot explained the toolkit contains a glossary, facilitator’s guides, audio recordings, and exercises that can be used in both classroom and work environments, as well as at home.

Eliot also explained that restoration is about being inspired. In line with this, the toolkit includes quotes from leaders in digital investigations to help reignite one’s passion for the work. These notes of inspiration are accompanied by journal prompts and affirmations to provide added motivation in a way that feels grounded.

According to Eliot, who worked closely with Gupta for several months on the toolkit, “we wanted to provide different resources to deepen people’s knowledge about community care, resiliency, and human rights to be mindful of why we do this work.”





Mikhail, Ph.D. candidate in anthropology and a graduate student researcher at the Human Rights Investigations Lab at UC Santa Cruz, stated that “secondary trauma, commonly known as compassion fatigue, refers to physiological, emotional, psychological impacts of doing this advocacy work over a sustained period of time. And so secondary exposure to secondary trauma is a form of stimuli that activates our nervous system. And we might not always know, or be aware of, what those effects look like.” The toolkit provides some guidance on how to identify responses in our bodies or minds, noting that “responses look different depending on the individual.”

Ultimately, the toolkit offers guidance on how to remain restored, healthy, and focused as digital investigators—minimizing the risks to all forms of security.

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# Conclusion

Collectively, the participants in this webinar outlined diverse strategies for maximizing human rights investigators' physical, digital and psychosocial wellbeing. These strategies can be used by diverse researchers regardless of the specific role that they hold, whether as students or faculty, as employees of nongovernmental organizations, as employees of private corporations, or otherwise.

Ultimately, the participants underscored the critical importance of not just picking and choosing whether to focus on digital, physical or psychosocial wellbeing, but to think of each form of security as inextricably intertwined with the others, and thus the value of having protocols and processes to maximize all three.





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