

# Traumatic Media Overload Could Impact Our Mental Health

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## Key points

- Social media platforms are facing pressure to protect users from harmful content, particularly violent media.
- Research suggests that children and adults can be traumatized by viewing excessively violent online content.
- Awareness about potentially violent material may help us better educate, cope, and filter this toxic content.

Are you shocked by online videos?

In the news, CEOs of the biggest social media corporations were grilled by U.S. Capitol lawmakers about all the risks to children from their online platforms. <sup>(1)</sup> Under pressure from parents and politicians, social media companies promise to implement systems to protect identities, conduct age verification, and limit young people from accessing inappropriate content.

Parents are rightly concerned about the effects of kids being exposed to adult-only sexual content. Beyond pornography, another potentially toxic category is violent "traumatic media"—extremely graphic and violent videos from crime scenes, wars, and disasters. Such images can be harmful to children and vulnerable adults.

In journalism, it is often said: "If it bleeds, it leads." Ratings follow the most sensational headlines, and gory stories of crime and violence often receive the most views. Historically, the "news" took days or weeks to arrive.

Today, video-sharing platforms supply instant, real-time images from around the world. This includes videos of violent events, now streamed to our digital devices. Videos of real violence—war, disaster, and crime—are easily accessible and widely shared.

What is the impact of viewing violent images? Whether by intentional "doom scrolling" or by inadvertent exposure, there is a real risk of media-induced traumatic stress. *Traumatic media* may trigger some people to experience severe distress, anxiety, or worse. This happened to me as I surfed a conventional news thread and clicked a harmless-looking link.



Suddenly, my screen was filled with full-on war footage. Violent images from a soldier's body cam, trench warfare, drones, explosions, and close combat are presented with a heavy metal soundtrack. At first, I was transfixed. Then I felt shocked and clicked off the aversive video. In this brief exposure, I was exposed to real scenes of violence that I did not wish to see but couldn't "un-see." There was no warning, just war digitally presented on my screen.

I am likely not alone in this experience. Given video-sharing apps' viral nature, millions of internet users may regularly view and viscerally experience upsetting images. This widespread traumatic media may be harmful to our collective mental health.

Faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, Human Rights Center reviewed the social and behavioral research on this topic. <sup>(2)</sup> For example, following the 9/11 terror attacks in the U.S. in 2001, journalists documented the negative psychosocial effects of traumatic media. Repeat exposure to violent images produced indirect or vicarious trauma. This "media-induced trauma" was noted by journalists and investigators who combed through hours of violent videos to document war crimes. Exposure to traumatic media may induce a kind of sympathetic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in some viewers. <sup>(3-5)</sup>

Perhaps it's not surprising that those investigating heinous crimes, mass shootings, wars, and disasters might report a type of PTSD from viewing the evidence. However, given today's mass access through internet video-sharing platforms, millions may be consuming traumatic videos beamed from crime scenes to battlefields. Those folks already dealing with PTSD or other clinical issues might be additionally triggered by traumatic media. Other vulnerable audiences, such as children, are not prepared to cope with videos of real violence on their devices. How can we protect ourselves from exposure to *traumatic media*?

Given the recent media attention to this issue, at least some (not all) platforms will soon provide age checks and warnings that ask viewers to voluntarily "click to see hidden content." This type of gateway should be universal for violent and other adult-only content. We continue to advocate for reasonable tools for those who wish to filter out *traumatic media*.

Users should also become more aware of the risks and which platforms, sites, and content you (or your children) are accessing. Finally, we can prepare mentally to tune out toxic imagery and tune in to our reactions to potential triggers for stress. If you must view traumatic media, learn to take breaks, turn off the sound, and talk or journal about your feelings about what you witnessed.

Parents can also speak with kids about the possibility of viewing unwanted videos. In much the same way we speak about "stranger danger" and other hazards of online social life, perhaps we must educate and engage each other to mentally defend ourselves from the toxic effects of *traumatic media*.

One concern is that vulnerable groups or children will be traumatized by toxic online images. A broader concern is that, as millions view *traumatic media*, it will ultimately desensitize us to horrific scenes of crime, disaster, and war. Perhaps we are better off remaining shocked and disturbed by violent media. Allowing ourselves to become desensitized could mean losing our empathy and humanity.

Caution is advised: Be aware of *traumatic media* and mindful of what goes into our senses.

References

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