

Communications, Intrusions and Accusations

Terror Survivors' Experiences on Social Media

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Executive Summary

- On behalf of Survivors Against Terror (SAT), Kantar surveyed survivors of terrorism, asking them about their experiences on social media following attacks. SAT also interviewed five of those who responded to the survey.
- Our research finds evidence that in the shocking and distressing aftermath of terror attacks, social media presents a profound challenge for survivors. Not only does it mean survivors may be reminded of their traumatic experiences and loss, but social media can lead to various forms of unwanted communication, intrusion, harassment and malicious messages.
- More than two thirds (67%) of survivors saw social media content about the attack they were involved in; of those, 97% found it harmful or troubling. Content included images and videos of the attack, information about the attacker, and personal contact requests/direct messages. Survivors were often exposed to content focused on them personally on social media and/or traditional news media within hours of attacks.
- The most common experience on social media was being contacted for comment by reporters and other users (experienced by 75% of respondents), followed by having personal photos and videos taken from social media pages (experienced by 45%), and having personal stories used as part of conspiracies (experienced by 35%). Further, 25% of respondents had their personal photos manipulated on social media. These were all worrying experiences.
- One survivor, who tried to challenge media outlets who had taken and used photos of her son from her social media page without permission, was told “*what is on social media is up for grabs*” (Respondent 34).
- Over half (52%) of survivors saw their family and/or friends contacted or targeted on social media following attacks, and 41% saw other survivors being targeted.
- Negative experiences were not unanimous, with some survivors finding positivity in the ability to share their perspective and to call out problems they felt were being ignored. Crucially though, positive experiences hinged on consent – survivors *choosing* to engage, *choosing* to share their story. This was not a common feature of survivors’ experiences on social media.
- Platforms were used, by some individuals, as a way of sending malicious, disturbing or threatening communications to those we surveyed and interviewed. Eight survivors (17%) shared their stories of being sent images of deceased loved ones, messages containing hate speech, accusations of being crisis actors involved in conspiracies, and death threats. These were a ‘double damage’ for terror attack survivors already traumatised by their experiences.
- Among the impacts of these experiences were changes in trust towards others (reported by 93%) and changes in behaviours (reported by 89%). The content survivors were exposed to and the messages they received were traumatic, and often re-traumatising, reminding them of the worst days of their lives.
- Trust was particularly impacted in relation to social media and media companies, as well as strangers or acquaintances, both on social media and in everyday life. The emotional consequences of this included poor sleep, nightmares, and anger. Some survivors increased security measures in and outside of their home, and started distancing themselves from social media altogether, demonstrating the significant level of worry caused by their experiences.

- Over three quarters (81%) of respondents identified the harmful effects of social media and media coverage as lasting for years; for some, the effects were ongoing at the time they participated in this project.
- Yet, at a time when survivors needed it most, our research shows a mixed picture in terms of the support they were able to access. Although support from loved ones, such as family and friends, and others including Victim Support and Police was available to some, there were also significant issues in getting their problems on social media addressed. The most valuable form of support, for many, was the direct action and intervention by others, such as taking down images or posts. Yet this was often not possible, even when legal action was pursued.
- Social media itself sometimes filled this support void, becoming a place survivors could go to engage with others and talk about their worries. However, this space is no replacement for professional support and expertise.
- Through the evidence presented in this report, we identify a range of recommendations to remedy the problems faced by survivors of terrorism, with responsibilities *shared* by regulators, government, social media companies and the public.

Section 1: Introduction

Survivors Against Terror (SAT) was set up by people injured and/or bereaved by terrorism. The mission as a group of survivors is to tackle terrorism and the harm that it causes, by focusing on three objectives:



Since being established in 2018, survivors of UK terror attacks (or overseas attacks impacting UK citizens) have repeatedly told us that media intrusion is a major area of concern. In 2021, we published [a detailed report](#) focused on this issue, after speaking to and surveying over a hundred survivors about their experiences.¹ Through that research, **social media** emerged as a unique pressure facing survivors.

As the previous research project wasn't specifically focused on social media, there was little space to explore in detail **how and why** it can be such a negative experience. To better understand the nature of the problem and the views of survivors, we embarked on another round of research.

This research has been led by survivors themselves, assisted by academic experts at Cardiff University, and one of the world's leading data and insights companies, Kantar. Over the past few months, we have spoken to and surveyed survivors about their experience on social media following terror attacks, with 46 survivors contributing to our survey, and five being interviewed.

What follows are their experiences and their views.

Why social media matters

Social media plays a significant role in society. It offers connection to family and friends, as well as an ability to connect individuals and groups who share common interests. It has also increasingly become a source of news for many users, not only from traditional/mainstream media pages, but also alternative news outlets and independent journalists. Unlike traditional 'print' media, social media enables users to access and share news rapidly, with content being published in real-time, just as events are unfolding. With the ability to instantly share updates – and personal views – it is not hard to see why social media has come to prominence in the aftermath of many shocking events, including terrorism.

After a terror attack, we often see widespread expressions of shock and outpourings of grief and sympathy. But social media also offers a space for other forms of content to be shared as well. This includes images and footage of attacks posted online, posted by those rushing to share news and updates with others. Sometimes this is done by the terrorists themselves, as was the case when the Christchurch killings were livestreamed online for audiences around the world. Supporters of terror groups and extremist ideologies are given a platform to praise and celebrate the heinous acts. Others exploit events to sow further division, propagating hate speech and encouraging further violence in support or retaliation of the original act. Those with a more conspiratorial view can question the 'reality' of whether attacks happened at all. Whatever the viewpoint, the ability to re-publish posts means other users can share and disseminate this varied content

¹ Survivors Against Terror (2021)

further, reaching more and more people. With the central purpose of terror attacks being to spread fear and to divide societies, social media acts as a key enabler in spreading this fear and sowing further division and uncertainty.

In our previous report² looking at traditional/mainstream media, some terror attack survivors indicated that social media had been a problem for them. They suggested it was used as a method for journalists to contact them (repeatedly) for comment, and in some cases, survivors' social media pages became a source of journalistic content, with personal photos and videos taken and used in reporting. This is something we explore in much more detail for this report, and in doing so, we also find some particularly worrying examples of disturbing, malicious and threatening communications to survivors from other social media users.

These include 'crisis actor' accusations from conspiracy theorists who target terror survivors. This is something highlighted by a number of survivors who took part in this research, who found social media was used as a platform to contact them and accuse them of lying. Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon in themselves; they have long been circulating about a range of events, including the Holocaust and 9/11. Conspiracists often claim they are exposing 'truth' and 'facts' to the public because 'official' versions of events are not reliable. For example, following the Sandy Hook school shooting, conspiracists claimed children were crisis actors as part of a plan to influence gun control legislation.³ Concerningly, a recent UK-based survey found 35% of respondents did not think the official story has revealed the whole truth about terror attacks in recent years, and 19% thought victims of terror attacks were not being truthful.⁴ More specifically, 26% of the respondents said they believed the government and mainstream media were involved in a cover-up about the Manchester Arena bombing, with 14% indicating they believed victims were 'crisis actors' pretending to be injured or killed. This is one of the key themes we will explore in depth in the findings of this report.

First, we provide an overview of the methods and sample underpinning this research.

² Survivors Against Terror (2021)

³ Sellnow et al. (2019)

⁴ Duffy (2022)

Section 2: Methods

This section outlines the data collection process for this report, which took place in two phases: (1) survey; and (2) semi-structured interviews.

Phase 1: Survey

The survey was hosted by Kantar and was live between 14/09/2024 and 17/10/2024. Invitations to take part in the survey with distributed via the SAT member network, as well as contacts in other organisations working with survivors. The survey used a mixture of single choice, multiple choice, and open-ended answer questions.

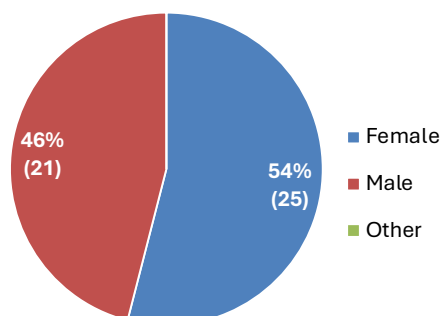
A total of 46 respondents completed the survey in full (through to the end); depending on their reported experiences, they progressed through the survey differently. For example, if respondents stated they did not have any experience of being personally targeted on social media, they would have skipped questions that asked about this in more detail, which would have been irrelevant for them. As a result, where survey responses are reported in the sections that follow, the *numbers* of responses to questions are provided for clarity. The survey was anonymous, but some descriptive demographic information about those who completed it are included below.

Sample characteristics

Age

- 18-25 9% (4)
- 25-34 11% (5)
- 35-44 11% (5)
- 45-54 24% (11)
- 55-64 39% (18)
- 65-74 4% (2)
- 75+ 2% (1)

Gender



Attack

Respondents were asked what their relation was to an attack (answers indicated in Figure 1 below). Several respondents had multiple associations to the attack, for example if they were a witness **and** had friends or relatives injured/killed.

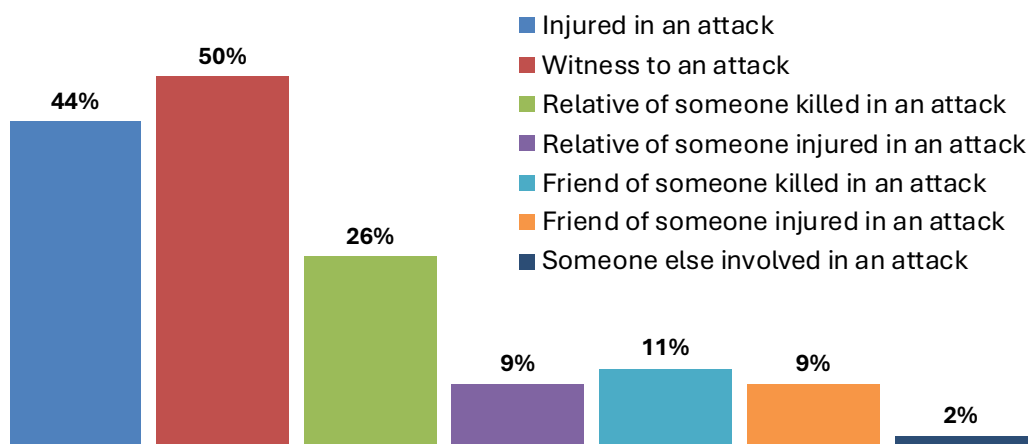


Figure 1: Respondents' relations to a terror attack

Those who responded to the survey included survivors or bereaved relatives and friends from the attacks listed in Table 1 below (ordered chronologically):

Attack (year)	Year
Israel	1986
7/7	2005
Abduction in Syria	2013
Westgate Mall, Kenya	2013
ISIS beheading	2014
Tunisia	2015
Bataclan	2015
Jo Cox MP	2016
Nice, France	2016
Westminster Bridge	2017
Manchester Arena	2017
London Bridge	2017
Finsbury Park	2017
Sri Lanka	2019
Fishmongers' Hall	2019
Streatham	2020

Table 1: Terror attacks that affected respondents

Use of social media

To provide context to their experiences, we asked respondents about their use of social media: 87% (N=40) reported using social media frequently, meaning they checked their accounts between every other day and multiple times daily (50% said they check multiple times daily, 37% said they check daily/every other day). Respondents were also asked which **three** platforms they used most frequently. The most popular platforms, based on the number of respondents who used them, are shown in Figure 2.

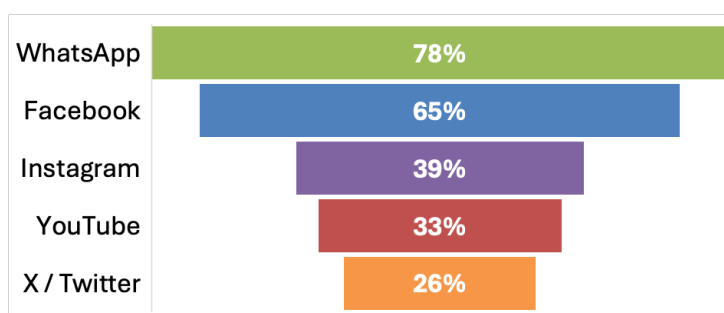


Figure 2: Top social media platforms used by respondents

Phase 2: Semi-structured follow-up interviews

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they could be contacted for a follow-up interview to expand on their answers at a later date, and 27 respondents provided their contact details. Survivors Against Terror contacted respondents and carried out **five** follow-up interviews in February-May 2025 via Teams/Zoom. Members of SAT led each interview, guided by an interview schedule. The stories shared by survivors during the interviews are presented as a number of 'case studies' throughout this report, providing more detailed insight into the experiences and impacts of what happened to them on social media.

In the sections that follow, we draw together survey and interview data to tell the story of survivors' experiences of social media following attacks. Our findings are divided into **five** key sections: survivors' experiences on social media; malicious communications and accusations; impacts: trauma, trust and behaviour change; responses to problems on social media; and responsibilities and potential solutions.

In some places, small edits have been made to survey and interview quotes to maintain anonymity.

Section 3: Survivors' experiences on social media

This section summarises survivors' experiences on social media, including the kinds of content they saw about an attack, the content they were personally the subject of, and some examples of the communications they received. A small number of survivors indicated there could be positives to social media, if managed appropriately, and this is discussed towards the end of the section.

3.1. Key facts: exposure to social media content about an attack

Over two thirds of survivors (67%, N=31) **saw social media content** about the attack affecting them. The content was seen across a range of different platforms; Figure 3 indicates the percentage of survivors who saw content on specific platforms. Almost all survivors (97%, N=30) found the content themselves, while one person was sent it by someone else.

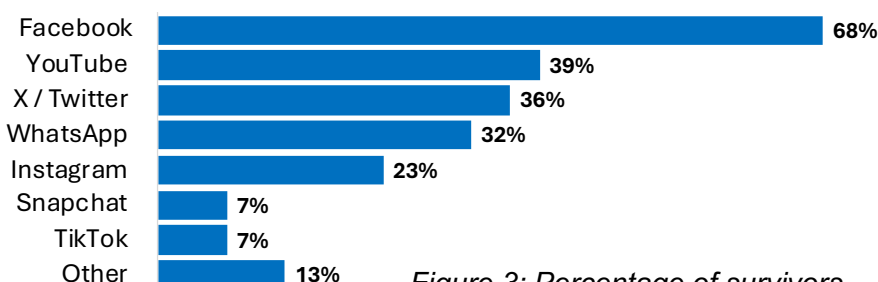


Figure 3: Percentage of survivors who saw content on each platform

The social media content survivors were exposed to varied. Although images and videos of the terror attack affecting them were the most common types of content (see Figure 4), there were also many other examples.

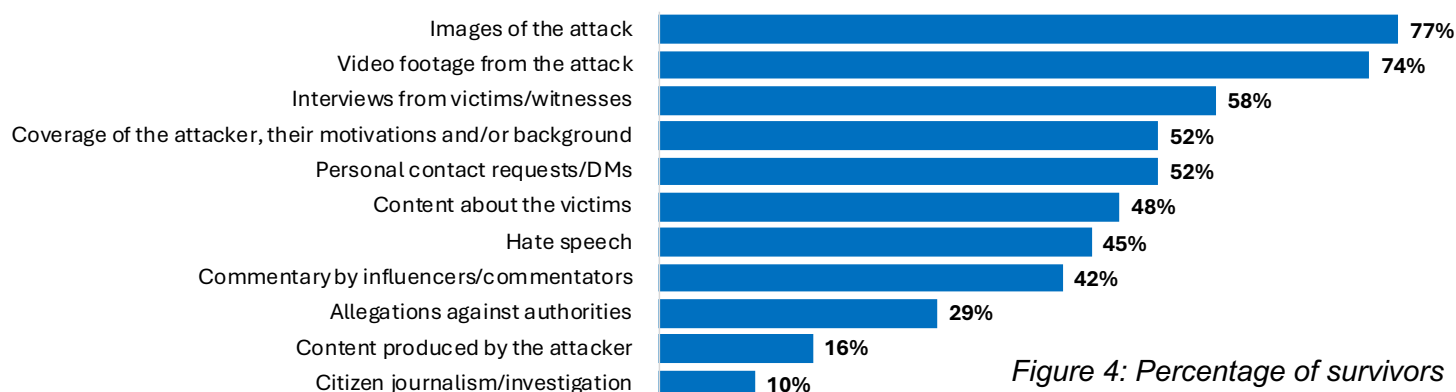


Figure 4: Percentage of survivors who saw each content type

Of the 31 survivors who saw social media content, 97% (N=30) reported that it was harmful or troubling. Figure 5 shows the types of content that survivors indicated had caused them the most harm or worry, with the multiple-choice options including:

- Images of the attack
- Video footage from the attack
- Coverage of the attacker, their motivations and/or background
- Hate speech on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or gender

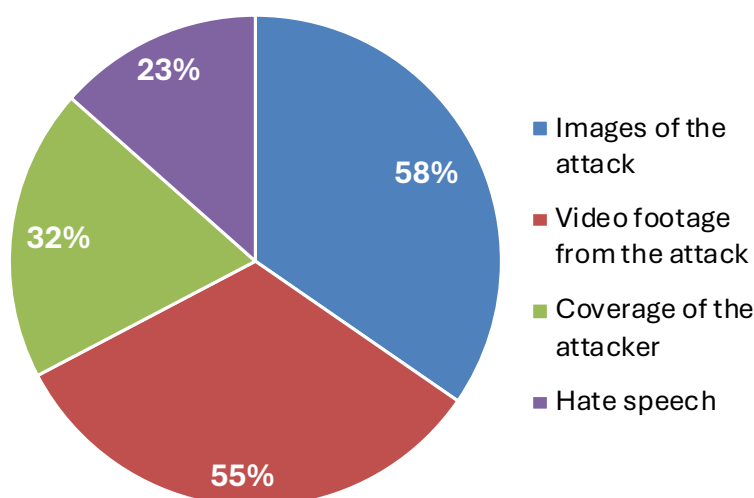


Figure 5: Percentage of survivors who found each type of content harmful or worrying

'Coverage of the attacker, their motivations and/or background' is a type of social (and mainstream) media content that is to be expected in the aftermath of terrorism, and public interest in such shocking events is understandable. However, this can become problematic when the focus on attackers is excessive. The concern here is that by focusing news reports – and social media posts – on attackers and their motivations, additional attention is directed towards their cause. This has led the European Commission to warn journalists that they are seen as useful "propaganda tools" by terrorists, who want the publicity.⁵ For survivors, this type of content provided difficult reminders of the people responsible for their life changing and traumatic experiences.

Case study: seeing footage of an attack on social media

One survivor described seeing footage from the attack they had been involved in and the level of interest from social media, as follows:

The thing that really stuck out for me was the sharing of footage from the attack. I think for me that's what really sticks in my memory. A couple of days after the attack, I decided to travel home to go to my parents and I was on the train, and I sat next to someone who was watching the footage on their phone. And I think for everyone, people who weren't involved in that attack, that footage of them on the bridge, I think that was kind of etched in people's memories. I think it was that idea of the citizen journalist, of people who just happened to be on the bridge at in that moment, filming it on their mobile phones, not really knowing what was happening and instantly putting it on Twitter. There were hundreds of different angles of the same footage.

For this survivor, the attack also meant the tragic loss of their friend, with social media forming part of their experience of learning and dealing with this news:

In the immediate 24 hours it was quite a long time before we knew that [my friend] had died. We knew he was missing, but we hadn't been told an update, we didn't know where he was... there was kind of rumours that people had seen footage on social media of someone getting CPR who fitted his description. So, I think it was that quite scary thing of, you know, finding out that someone was very, very seriously injured and not knowing the details through social media. I think that was that was really difficult for us.

The social media stuff just went just went crazy. Something that I found quite invasive was photos being taken from [my friend's] social media. There was one photo in particular that kind of became a bit... it was used in lots of mainstream media from his Instagram. And it's him with a pint, and I just... it's such a personal memory for me that I couldn't compute this was the way he was being shown in the media. And on the one hand, it was quite nice because it's a nice picture of him and he looks really happy and it's him, you know, in his natural habitat in the pub. But it also just felt really invasive that that quite personal moment was taken away. And it means I don't like that picture anymore.

- Interview with survivor (2)

⁵ Ritzmann and Wichmann (2021)

3.2. Being the subject of content or contact

Of the 46 survivors who responded to our survey, half (50%, N=23) said they or someone they knew were the subject of **both social media and mass media reporting**, and a further 9% (N=4) were the subject of mass media reporting alone (41% (N=19) did not experience any reporting about them or someone they knew). Of the 27 survivors who experienced this reporting, over two thirds (70%, N=19) felt it had **international reach**.

- Personally named
- Personally photographed
- Details of background/ biography published
- Personal address published (or indicated)

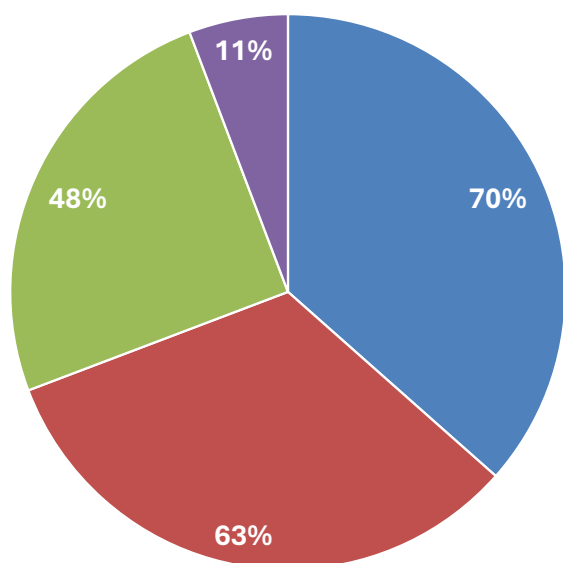


Figure 6: Types of personal content experienced by survivors

We also asked these 27 survivors about any social media content or reporting that focused on them **individually and personally**: this was experienced by 74% (N=20) of them. However, only half were contacted directly *before* content was posted or published about them, while the others were not. The different types of personal content experienced by these 20 survivors is shown in Figure 6 (some experienced more than one).

Survivors who had seen social media content were also asked whether **anyone else linked to the attack** was the target of reporting. Over half (52%, N=14) said their family and/or friends were targeted, and 41% (N=11) saw other survivors of the attack being targeted. Survivors who faced this kind of personal reporting experienced it **very soon** after the attack, with 65% (N=13) experiencing it within the first 24 hours, and 20% (N=4) experiencing it 24-48 hours after the attack.

For the 20 survivors who were personally subjected to contact and content about them on social media, they pointed to a range of sources (sometimes multiple) being responsible, as indicated in Figure 7.

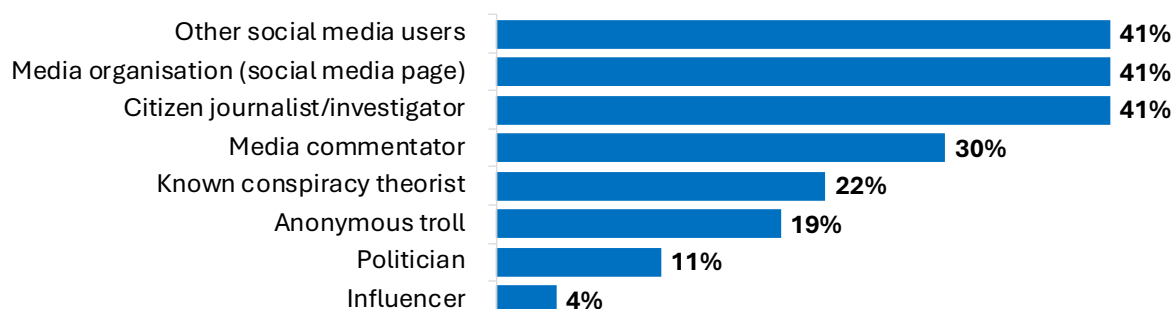


Figure 7: Sources of social media content/contact targeting survivors

Survivors' experiences of contact and content were varied and often multiple, as summarised in Table 2. The most common experiences were being asked to comment, having personal social media content taken without consent, and having their stories used in conspiracy theories. These were all worrying and concerning.

Type of contact/content/experience	Respondents reporting the experience % (N)	Relation to attack (N)	Caused the <u>most</u> harm or worry (N)
I and/or my friends/family were contacted via email/social media/telephone and asked to comment	75% (15)	8 injured; 6 relatives of someone killed; 1 witness	4
Personal photos/videos from my social media were shared without my consent	45% (9)	5 injured, 4 relatives of someone killed	4
My story was used as part of conspiracy theories	35% (7)	4 injured, 3 relatives of someone killed	4
I was accused of being a crisis actor*	30% (6)	3 injured, 3 relatives of someone killed	3
My place of work was contacted	30% (6)	6 injured	0
I and/or my friends/family were harassed or doxed**	25% (5)	4 injured, 1 relative of someone killed	0
My personal photos were manipulated	25% (5)	3 injured, 2 relatives of someone killed	1
False allegations were made about my reputation or biography	20% (4)	2 injured, 1 witness, 1 relative of someone killed	2
Private photos/videos (i.e. <i>not</i> on social media) were shared without my consent	15% (3)	2 injured, 1 relative of someone killed	1
Other	10% (2)	1 injured, 1 friend of someone killed	2

*A crisis actor is the idea of someone pretending or hired to act out a tragedy or disaster

**Doxing is to publicly identify or publish private information about someone, especially as a form of punishment or revenge

Table 2: Summary table showing survivors experiences of different content/contact, their relation to an attack, and the harm/worry caused by the experience

As the third column of Table 2 shows (relation to attack), those who were **injured** or had **relatives** killed during attacks were the main targets for this kind of personalised content/contact. This suggests those with the **closest connection** to an attack become the primary targets for social media attention and interest.

Case study: intrusion and social media

In the immediate aftermath of an attack inside a central London building, one survivor described the large crowds they faced as they attempted to leave with other survivors.

On the day, there people were taking videos of us and putting them on social media. The area had been cordoned off and we had been stuck inside the building until the area had been deemed safe. We were a small group in shock and when we walked out of the building, there were lots of crowds in front of us, filming us. It was horrific. Thankfully, one of the policemen commandeered a bus for us, and then we were taken away to an incident room.

It is no surprise that being filmed and photographed after such a traumatic and upsetting experience was 'horrific' for this survivor. This seems like an obvious intrusion – yet those outside the building, whether journalists or members of the public, obviously felt an urge to capture the scene and share updates with followers and friends. Later, the intrusion continued for this survivor, when a post she intended to share privately with a small group was taken by a newspaper and quoted publicly.

Soon after, I posted on a private Facebook post, thanking someone for saving my life and [a tabloid] quoted me in an article they wrote. They never contacted me. They had used my private comment on Facebook and named me, so I took it down and stopped using social media.

- Interview with survivor (4)

3.3. Personal experiences of social media contact and content

We gave survivors space to describe their personal experiences of social media content and contact in more depth in the survey, where they felt comfortable to do so. Those who responded were generous in the detailed descriptions they provided. Many shared similar experiences and several examples are presented below, illustrating methods of contact involving social media, and personal content taken from survivors' social media pages.

Social media as a method of contact

Multiple methods were used by those trying to contact survivors of attacks. We found many examples in our previous media report, such as unwanted calls and doorstepping from journalists; often, social media has simply been used as another method of contact, as this survivor found:

“ I was approached by numerous journalists through emails, social media as well as visiting my family's addresses. (Respondent 42)

As we found in the media report, the issue here is the sense of *intrusion and harassment* this kind of contact creates for survivors at a time when they have experienced huge trauma or loss. Feeling pestered or pressured to give information to people online is unwelcome. Some experienced more sinister forms of contact from other social media users in order to obtain information. One survivor described people becoming obsessed with them and their family:

“ People on social media who become obsessed with the tragedy and you and your family members, making things up like being their 'best friend' or intrusively trying to force themselves on to you is very very uncomfortable. (Respondent 6)

In this sense, social media offers a means for strangers to reach survivors, without needing their home address or personal contact number. The sense of intrusion, especially at such an emotionally challenging time, is clear.

Content taken from survivors' social media pages

Crossover between social media and mainstream media was seen by **half** (50%, N=23) of the respondents who took part in our survey, and a key problem reported by a number of survivors was having their personal social media content taken and republished elsewhere. Some described the intrusive and frustrating nature of this, particularly when their content was being used without consent:

“Media outlets were using photos of our son that they took off his social media accounts and family photos off our accounts. They were in the papers and on TV, and when challenging them we were told that what is on social media is up for grabs. (Respondent 34)

“I remember seeing news sites and other social media platforms/news platforms take tweets and Facebook posts from my late friend and using them in their stories as pity p*rn (apologies but for lack of better wording or term). I also remember my tweets and my friends tweets about the show and what happened after being used and referenced without permission, as proof of a timeline of what happened or again to provoke pity. (Respondent 30)

“I felt that I came out lightly because I hid in the shadows a bit- but any media was so hard, especially all the negative media- and the lazy reporting too where facts were wrong, or things were pulled off social media accounts. (Respondent 38)

“I was in hospital for months after the attack so looked at news and social media long after the event, where my photos were taken from my husband's Facebook profile and printed in stories all over the media and news (Respondent 42)

There are two key issues here. First, social media content being taken from victims' and survivors' social media pages and republished elsewhere is a common occurrence and often involves journalists. Second, and related to this, is that there are clear questions about journalistic ethics. Journalists are supposed to be governed by a code of ethics when reporting these kinds of events, which should safeguard survivors from the kinds of intrusion described above. And yet many of the stories shared by survivors suggest ethics are abandoned when journalists are seeking a 'scoop', with focus shifting to the story and its content, rather than consequences for individuals. Victims are having their personal content thrust into the public space as a result, with no power or agency to decide how, when or where it is used.

Case study: deceptive journalism

One survivor described the deceptive tactic adopted by journalists to gain their trust via social media messaging, most likely in the hopes of getting new and private details of what had happened during the attack.

We were being contacted by lots of journalists from the mainstream media via Twitter, via Facebook. And again, it was just feeling quite invasive that they were reaching out to us in that way. That was in the first few days after, and I think that's the thing that I found quite scary was not knowing who to trust.

Lots of us knew each other so we were connected, and we were all quite in touch. Looking back that was kind of quite damaging, because it meant that if someone else said, "oh, I was involved too", you were like 'oh, OK, they're an ally, they're on our side'. There was one person in particular who contacted me on Facebook Messenger who said that, and they turned out to be a journalist.

- Interview with survivor (2)

Case study: sudden interest through social media

One survivor explained to us how the content they had posted of their son at the Manchester Arena very quickly led to journalist interest, even though their account was relatively private.

Personally, my social media was quite hard to get onto. I mean, the interesting thing about social media, for me personally is, I'd posted a picture of [my son] and I at the concert before the concert started, saying '[son's] first concert'. And of course, I then didn't post anything for ages, you know, I did let family know that I was safe and stuff, but I didn't post anything.

But before I'd even got home that night, a friend of a friend who worked for the BBC had contacted me via social media saying, you know, "can we speak to you tomorrow morning on Breakfast?" So I thought, gosh, that's crazy, you know, I hadn't really thought that through.

- Interview with survivor (3)

3.4. The potential for positive experiences

A small number of survivors did indicate there were positives to their experience on social media. One person referred to a general sense that there were some positive 'helpful' encounters, while another described a more personally positive experience, after sharing their views on social media:

“ We must not forget that there were many examples of help from the media that had a massively positive impact (Respondent 4)

“ The response on Twitter, that I was aware of, was overwhelmingly supportive and positive. It gave me a platform to express my views about what had happened. It made me feel more in control of the narrative around the events, although that may have been an illusion. [...] My Twitter following quickly increased from about 600 to 26K, and I received lots of retweets and messages, overwhelmingly supportive I have to say. I didn't see much negative feedback, although I know it was out there because friends sometimes told me about it. (Respondent 25)

In some instances and for some individuals, including the two captured in the following case studies, engaging on social media could provide a sense of power at a very difficult time. However, the key theme here was survivors having **agency and choice** to engage with social media on their own terms, rather than being pestered or forced to engage. This is markedly different to the troubling experiences of the majority of survivors we spoke to, particularly those who had content taken from their social media pages *without* consent.

Case study: reclaiming the narrative through social media

After losing a loved one and then seeing what appeared to be opportunistic reactions from people in the public eye, one bereaved parent posted a brief message social media to share their views and ask that their child's story not be used in such a political way.

I needed to say something. I also think that most of the reaction on social media was very positive, certainly initially. I didn't get much in the way of abuse, though later on, I did see a few comments from people, usually where people were commenting on tweets. There were a few abusive ones saying, you know, "he got what he deserved," and it was just stupid stuff. I blocked those people, and I responded to a few of them.

Despite being advised to avoid social media at the time, and despite encountering some abusive messages, this person felt able to manage the situation and reflected on their overall online experience with positivity. As well as feeling compelled to represent their loved one, engaging on social media gave them a sense of control during an extremely difficult period.

Initially, it felt good to have done something. I certainly felt very frustrated at being told that we shouldn't say anything, and having done so, it seemed to have a positive effect. I think it did, anyway. People were very supportive towards us. People wanted to know what I thought, because of what had happened, and that was helpful. I suppose it felt like a bit of a responsibility, but it also felt like an opportunity to try and shape things a bit, you know. It also felt like a responsibility to represent what [he] stood for. On a positive note, it probably did have an impact. I did get some quite good feedback from various people about it. I felt in control, and this was probably part of the coping mechanism.

This person did also acknowledge, however, that their positive experience on social media (and in traditional news media) was not shared by all survivors of terror.

We, I think, got off very lightly, and I'm grateful for that.

- Interview with survivor (5)

Case study: connecting to others through social media

Some felt social media made it possible to make connections with other survivors who shared experiences and could empathise, particularly for young people in the aftermath of the Manchester Arena attack. This can also bring its challenges, however, particularly at a time when emotions are running high.

I think that parents really didn't know that much at all about what was happening on social media at the time. There were lots of people that were already on some sort of Twitter account for Ariana Grande. Lots of them went to the concert and therefore were impacted and became survivors, and they already had this network set up. So, I think on a positive side, I think some of them would say that's how they connected with others that were involved.

Social media became a two-edged sword because for lots of young people, that's how they got their peer support, much much more than the adults. What's interesting about some of those groups is that people can write anything on them. A wonderful woman that I know that was affected by Manchester set up a Facebook group. It was great, but she had a job, and so if somebody posted something at 11 in the morning and she was teaching, she wouldn't see it. So, it could be on there for quite a while... there was a whole load of stuff that I know a lot of the young people dealt with.

- Interview with survivor (3)

Section 4: Malicious Communications and Accusations

Beyond the experiences that left survivors feeling a sense of intrusion and/or worry outlined in the preceding section, some of the other examples of social media communications that emerged in this research were even more concerning. This section reveals the troubling encounters described by eight (17%) of those who took part. In some cases, these were malicious communications intended to disturb or threaten individuals, while in other cases, survivors described being the target of crisis actor claims and disinformation.

4.1. Malicious, disturbing and threatening communications

Some of the most concerning findings of this research are the malicious, disturbing and threatening communications survivors have been subjected to. They show how social media has been a place where individual survivors have become the subject of hateful posts and malicious messages. In the pages that follow, some of the most poignant experiences recounted by survivors are discussed.

One survivor, who was already irritated when they found their personal content was being used in media reports, was more concerned when they found themselves being discussed hatefully online:

“ I wasn't thrilled with how my private social media pics and videos from before the attack were used in reports, but that was a minor irritation. What upset me more was how what happened to me, along with pictures and videos of me injured and bloodied, were used by racists to propagate hate speech. (Respondent 35)

This echoes other evidence about increases in hate speech and hate crime in the aftermath of terror attacks.⁶ What we often see is entire communities being targeted because of a perception that they share some characteristic with the attacker(s), for instance, Muslim communities being subjected to hate following Islamist-inspired attacks, such as those claimed by Daesh (ISIS). In one specific example following the Westminster Bridge attack in 2017, the image of a Muslim woman walking past a victim being treated for their injuries was used to fuel hateful and racist narratives online.⁷ The experience described by Respondent 35, who was injured in the London Bridge attack later the same year, shows that this hate can even extend to those personally affected by an attack, causing ‘**double damage**’ to survivors.

As well as instances of survivors finding themselves being placed within hateful narratives, we found examples of direct communications that were at times deliberately malicious, disturbing or threatening. This included being sent images and videos from the attack they were involved in. As the survivors described the distress this caused at an already upsetting time, the two following stories point to there being some social media users who seek to deliberately disturb survivors of terror attacks. In one case, this included an image of a deceased loved one:

“ People were killed by a nail bomb with nuts bolts and screws. One of my daughters got a twitter message off someone who posted two photos next to each other. One was of her brother who was killed and the one next to it was a bunch of rusty nuts, bolts and screws. She was very distressed through this. The police tried to trace it but said they cannot as it came from another country. (Respondent 34)

⁶ For examples, see: Innes et al. (2018); Roberts et al. (2018); Williams and Burnap (2016); Hanes and Machlin (2014).

⁷ Innes, M. et al. (2023)

“ No one had contacted me about consent for media coverage. I woke up in the hospital and once I was stable and able to use my phone, I received videos and reports of the attack which deeply affected me. This caused me depression and a shock to my body as it was a very frightening sight, and at the time I was very confused about the events. This was very difficult for me. (Respondent 23)

As well as being sent deliberately traumatising content, some survivors experienced direct threats from other social media users. One survivor felt the threat was racially motivated, while for two others, the threat was more personal:

“ I did receive a few threats from crazy people who posted comments online in response to national and international television news. They resented my helping save six people from other countries and races. (Respondent 45)

“ Received death threats to me and my kids over Facebook (Respondent 31)

“ Someone sending death threats to myself and my friends for being ‘crisis actors’ (Respondent 36)

Receiving a **death threat** is a highly troubling experience and was **reported by 9% of survivors** who took part in this survey. Threats directed towards innocent survivors of terrorism in the aftermath of an already traumatising event is an issue that should not be ignored.

Case study: being sent disturbing and malicious messages

One of the survivors we interviewed, who helped to organise a community group, was randomly contacted and sent worrying content on Twitter, around 18 months after the attack. The experience was strange and worrying, impacting how they then engaged on social media.

They must have followed, and I had agreed to follow them back. And they were saying really great stuff like “we’ve seen you, it was great,” and I must have said “thank you.” And then next minute, they just kept sending me pictures of the terrorist from Manchester, just pictures in the message. And then they just started to send me messages of poo, faeces. I didn’t know whether they were trying to say ‘this is what we think about him’ or whether it was to scare or frighten us, I don’t know. But it was just bizarre. I started to close down who could connect with us, which was a shame, really. I was starting to get anxious about opening it and checking, and I’m pretty certain it wasn’t just me, I think a few of the few of the bereaved families also had something similar. I do think somebody spoke to the police about it, but nothing came of it and obviously I just blocked that person and kind of left it. And then of course, we would have racist comments on stuff, expecting us to maybe respond and join in with some racist stuff. And so, I was constantly thinking, I want to take this down, I don’t want that connected to us in any way, so some of that was difficult really.

This survivor was also aware of young people being targeted maliciously.

I know that lots of the young people had issues on social media. They had messages on Instagram, saying things like “it’s a shame you weren’t killed in the bomb” and stuff like that, nasty stuff, really. I think we spoke to the family liaison officer about the pictures of the terrorists being sent to us and stuff, but that’s not going to be possible for everybody. I think for some people the police did go and try and find out who it was, and it was seen as harassment.

- Interview with survivor (3)

4.2. Crisis actor accusations, false claims and disinformation

As shown in Table 2 earlier, seven survivors who responded to our survey said they had their stories used as part of conspiracy theories; of those, six said they were also accused of being crisis actors.

Conspiracies and crisis actor accusations were a 'double damage' predominantly reported by survivors who were **injured** or **lost a family member**, which shows those with the closest connection to attacks are particularly susceptible to this type of accusatory content. Conspiracy theories are of course not new, and even before the popularity of social media we see today, information could be used maliciously as part of conspiracies about attacks. This was reported by a survivor of the 7/7 attacks:

“ Although I had an account, I wasn't a huge user of social media myself then. [...] A more tech savvy colleague advised me I was named on a website which was about conspiracy theories. What was written was vicious and malicious implying the event didn't happen etc. I didn't follow though to look for more articles, I was too upset. I got rid of my mobile phone. (Respondent 46)

What is unique when it comes to social media today, however, is that the individuals being targeted in the claims made about attacks can now be contacted directly. As a quote towards the end of the last section showed, for one survivor, crisis actor accusations resulted in death threats from people online (Respondent 36). Another survivor, who was both injured and lost a loved one in the Manchester Arena attack, described the accusations made against them and their loved ones in more detail:

“ Photos of me injured at the arena ended up on tv and online without my knowledge or consent. Conspiracy theorist believes we were crisis actors and my murdered sister now lives abroad. (Respondent 6)

Manchester Arena was a frequent target for conspiracies and accusations of the presence of crisis actors. In October 2024, two survivors of the attack, Martin and Eve Hibbert, were successful in their harassment case against a conspiracy theorist making false claims.⁸ This included that the attack never happened, no one was killed, and the Hibberts were faking their injuries. To 'prove' these claims, the conspiracist's activities included spying on the family home and secretly recording footage of Eve, causing anxiety and distress to the family. By accusing survivors of lying in this way, blame is redirected towards those most impacted by attacks, positioning them as complicit in the 'deceit' organised by those in power. Conspiracy theorists may also monetise their claims, using them to sell books and films to their followers and spread them further. For survivors we spoke to, this led to harassment and personal threats from strangers, prolonging their suffering.

Case study: attack denial

Attack denials were experienced in different settings by some survivors, including in the comments of social media posts, as well as in a face-to-face encounter with a work colleague.

We had decided that we didn't want to have anything on social media when we set up originally. It was very private. We weren't called [recent group name], we were called [another group name] because that's how we'd connected. I have a memory of when we were posted on BBC or something. We'd done something on somebody else's social media, and in the comments, people would say that the attack didn't happen. I remember that it upset people, our members, to say that that was the case. And a colleague said it to me, I was like, oh my, oh my God, obviously she's read some crap on social media.

- Interview with survivor (3)

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj0j8r8558yo>

Case study: conspiracy theories about friends

One survivor, who had been present during the attack where a friend was killed, later saw people posting maliciously and denying the attack had ever happened:

I never saw a conspiracy post about me, but there was a conspiracy theorist that I saw saying horrible things about [my friend]. It was so nasty. I got very upset. They were saying it never happened, and I found a website full of nasty conspiracy theories. I found it very distressing and traumatic.

With such a personal connection to the events, this survivor found the inaccuracy of reports, both from traditional media outlets and in social media posts, highly upsetting and stressful to see:

I knew my partner was reading it, and I knew he was reading untrue things which was stressful for me. I knew the media were being lazy and saying anything without checking facts, which can be very detrimental especially when they say untrue horrible things about people who have died. I found it very upsetting, you know, it's bad enough when you're reading newspaper reports which are inaccurate and then you go on social media and you think, people don't know what they're talking about. So, I just had to stay away.

- Interview with survivor (4)

Section 5: Impacts: Trauma, trust and behaviour change

Survivors told us about the lasting impacts of the emotional trauma and distress they experienced because of what they encountered on social media. The implications of this were not only in terms of their attitudes and trust towards others, but also their behaviour.

5.1. Lasting trauma

Our survey showed that, on top of the already traumatic experience of an attack, social media can cause further distress for survivors of terror. For example, one respondent shared: *“I saw the knives I was stabbed with on photos on X”* (Respondent 40). As new information emerges, it's not uncommon for images of weapons to be published by the media in the days and weeks following attacks. But viewing this from the point of view of a survivor offers a new perspective: for this person, this meant being exposed once again to the very weapon that harmed them, an undoubtedly traumatic experience.

From intrusion and harassment by those attempting to contact them, to the ongoing exposure to posts about the attack, social media was a negative experience for most, as the two examples below indicate. For both individuals, the trauma of the attack itself was reinforced and exacerbated by social media:

““ *The content of the attack being shared all over the news on TV and Radio, and also on social media, was hugely triggering for me and made my PTSD a lot worse. (Respondent 22)*

““ *Despite the injury and horror of the event I found press coverage, intrusion and the aftermath far more detrimental to my health, well-being and recovery than the incident itself (Respondent 46)*

We also asked survivors how long these kinds of impacts lasted. Of the 27 who answered this question: twelve survivors (44%) indicated the effects are ongoing; ten survivors (37%) said the impacts lasted several years; three survivors (11%) said several months; one (4%) said ‘not sure’; and one (4%) said ‘until at least once the inquest was over’. Examples include:

““ *At least 7 years, even to this day I'm sceptical of the Tabloids, I don't talk to them. (Respondent 2)*

““ *I still struggle with them now due to conspiracy theorists still obsessed and people posting about it for pity likes. (Respondent 30)*

““ *Until at least once the inquest was over- which was another very stressful time. They did cover my witness statement on all mainstream media- and I was very paranoid about this especially because I had to testify against my bosses that had lied in the inquest about events, and then also because I knew the perpetrator. I thought the media would have a field day- and that I would become a victim to far right-wing groups but thankfully that was avoided as they didn't ask questions about the day to me. ugh, what a horrible time. (Respondent 38)*

““ *Years? I still have vivid moments where the memories seem fresh. (Respondent 45)*

As highlighted in section 3.4 earlier, there were a small number of exceptions to the pattern of negative experiences recalled by most other survivors, particularly where there was a *choice* to engage on or with social media in some way. However, much more common were the kinds of re-traumatising effects described in the detailed account below.

Case study: (re)traumatising social media content

For one survivor who was severely injured during an attack, a video posted on Facebook provided frightening insight into what had happened to them.

I didn't know anything about the attack, I found myself in hospital and didn't know what had happened. I had been coming out for dinner before the attack, and someone called over to me so I rushed to give first aid. I then woke up in hospital which is when I got told about the terror attack. When I then looked at my Facebook page, there was a video of me bleeding, blood everywhere and someone said that I had been passed out for 40 minutes. I couldn't believe it. I still have flashbacks to that video now.

The attack itself touched many different aspects of this person's life, not only physically and emotionally, but also their relationships and their employment. Being exposed to the social media footage brought an additional trauma, and even eight years on, flashbacks are still a problem.

The whole terror attack has completely changed my life. I have many health problems now, I lost my job- I had been a close protection officer before this, and after the attack I could no longer do this work. I have problems with my eyesight, hearing and mobility to name a few physical implications. But the trauma of the attack has had a greater impact. The accident has also affected my wife and children, and other family and friends. Psychologically, the impact is just as difficult. I am depressed and anxious, always find myself thinking too much, and have had little support through these years. I still struggle to be in crowded spaces and crossing the roads.

The impact of social media specifically has had deep and continuing effects too. I still get flashbacks to the video that I saw of myself online in those early days. It is a visual reminder of a terrifying moment, I am bleeding and lying on the ground. I was told that after 40 minutes a nurse came to help.

- Interview with survivor (1)

5.2. Changes in attitudes and behaviour

We asked survivors to think about the areas of their lives that may have been impacted by their experience on social media, from their own personal wellbeing to their local community. For the 27 who responded to this multiple-choice question, the impacts were mostly felt personally and close to home (Figure 8).

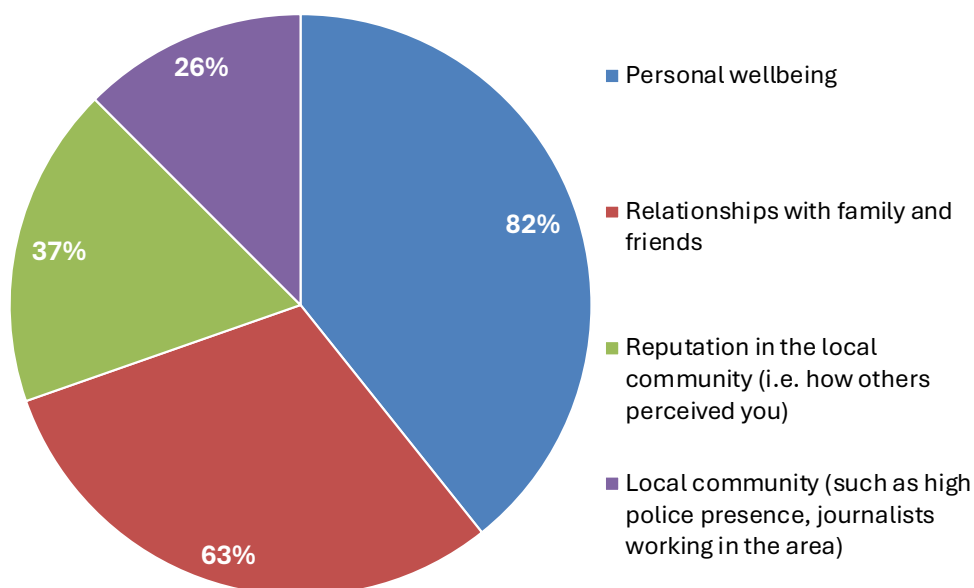


Figure 8: Areas of life impacted by social media experiences

We also presented ten statements about the potential impacts of being targeted on social media following attacks, and asked survivors to what extent they personally felt each of them. The 18 full responses to these statements, point to a spectrum of effects, with significant negative impacts on quality of life, emotional state and feelings of safety. From Figure 9 below, we can see that a lot of the time, many survivors felt watchful and on guard, as well as upset, irritable and angry.

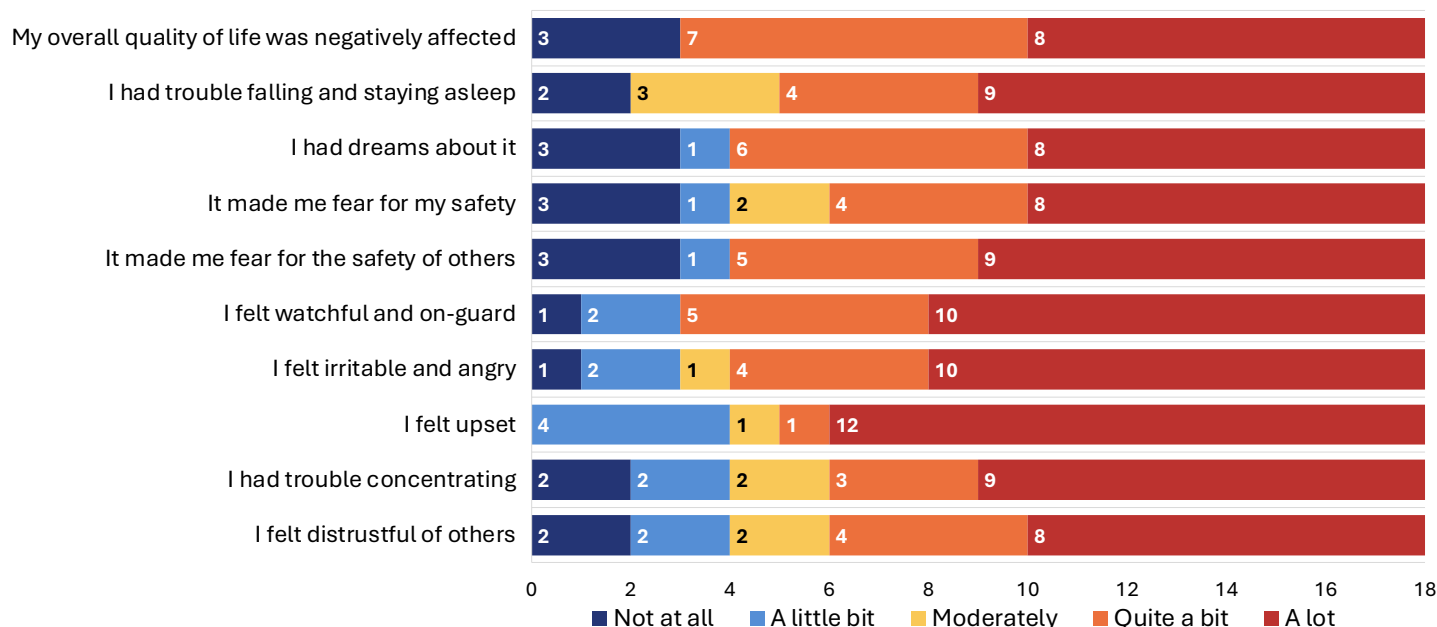


Figure 9: Survivors' responses (N) to statements about the impact of social media on wellbeing and quality of life

To explore issues of trust and feeling on-guard in more depth, we asked survivors whether their trust was impacted in relation to specific groups of people or institutions/organisations. From the responses of the 27 survivors who answered this question, 93% (N=25) reported trust impacts; these were greatest for groups and organisations where there was no direct or personal connection (see Figure 10).

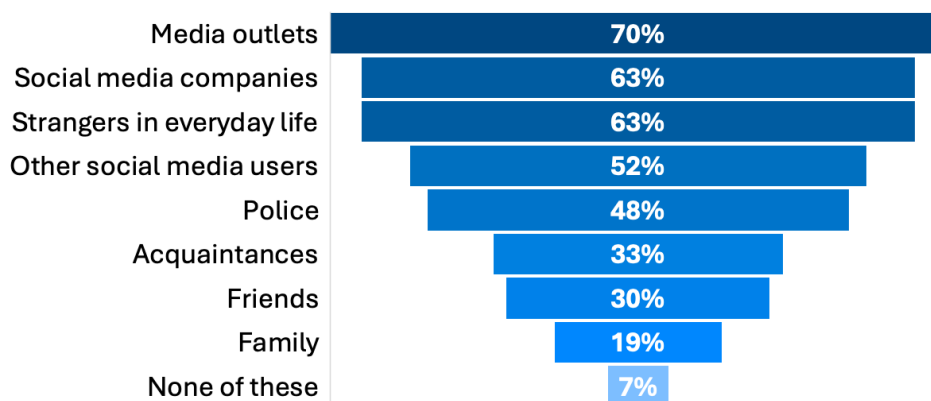


Figure 10: Trust impacts relating to different groups/institutions

It's probably unsurprising to see media outlets and social media companies chosen by many survivors who answered this question, given the focus of this survey. More interesting are the impacts on trust in other people, specifically strangers in everyday life and other social media users. The findings indicate that survivors' poor experiences on social media following attacks can lead to generalised feelings of distrust, and a more negative or sceptical outlook towards others, even those they haven't been in contact with before. It's

worth noting here that impacts on trust in family and friends were also reported by some, suggesting that personal networks may not always be the most suitable source of support for survivors. Finally, impacts on trust in police were reported by almost half of survivors who answered this question. This could be explained, for some, by a perceived lack of action to support survivors when they experienced issues on social media, which will be explored in an upcoming section (6.2).

The survey data demonstrate that social media not only impacted survivors' attitudes in the ways mentioned above, but for some, there were also behavioural impacts. From the 18 responses to a multi-option question about this, the most common area for behaviour change was security (see Figure 11), with over half of survivors improving security awareness outside their home. Survivors also reported changes to their security measures at home and to their social media usage. Overall, such changes in security and/or social media behaviour were reported by 89% (N=16) of survivors responding to this question.

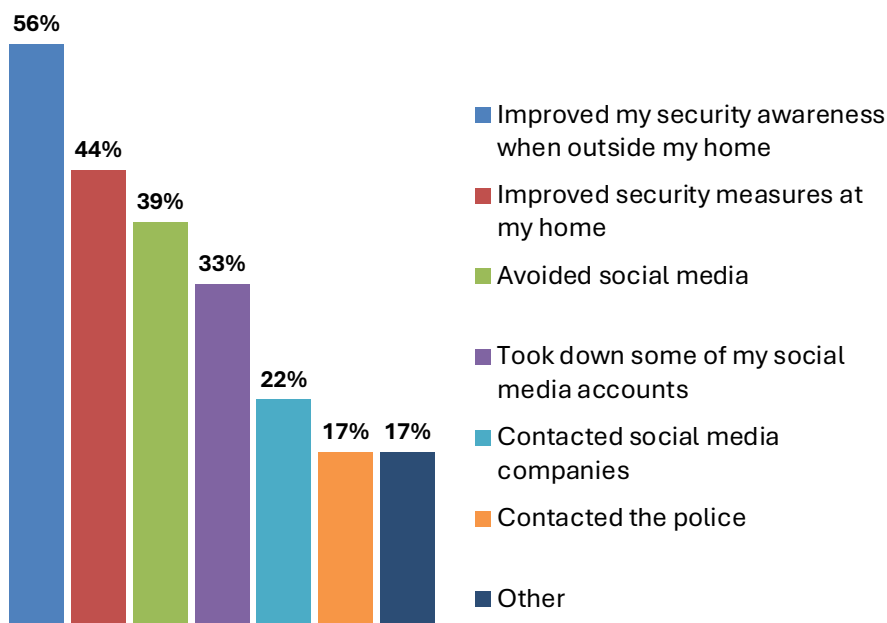


Figure 11: Actions taken by survivors as a result of their social media experiences

These findings point to the genuinely threatening nature of the social media contact and content experienced by survivors, demonstrating that communications in the online space have real world implications, tangibly affecting outlook, attitude and behaviour.

Case study: social media and trauma responses

Reflecting on the longer-term impacts of their experience following an attack, one survivor discussed the emotions they face when a new tragedy take place, and how they've changed their approach to social media in an attempt to manage this.

Now I think I feel quite triggered, especially by the way it's portrayed in the media and on social media, like the guy recently with the crossbow, the crossbow killing. And those really high-profile attacks that aren't necessarily motivated by terrorism, but they are in everyone's consciousness. They're so massive that everyone's talking about them and everyone's sharing opinions on social media. And that can be quite a difficult time for people like us who've been affected by serious, serious attacks.

I think it just amplifies lots of that concern and that worry, and it means that rather than just thinking, you know, 'oh God, that's really awful,' I almost have the trauma response of racing heart and feeling a bit anxious about it. So, I think it's things I would already be concerned about, but [the attack] just makes it kind of hit home much more.

I have very private social media accounts that I only use for very close family and friend, and I think before the attack I was more public with Twitter and with Instagram and Facebook, and I was definitely using it more. Whereas now, I'm really moving away from it.

- Interview with survivor (2)

Case study: changing relationship with social media

One survivor reflected on the way their relationship with social media had changed because of the lasting trauma of their experience.

I didn't know how to seek support, I didn't think anyone would care. I'd definitely say that since the attack, I've had a different relationship with social media, also because I was supposed to be posting to social media at the event. And the last message that I sent to my friend was a picture, and I asked him to tweet it, and he did, so social media for me carries that trauma. I'd say the long-term impact is I am more cautious, and I'd say I'm much more savvy. I don't engage like I used to.

- Interview with survivor (4)

Section 6: The response to problems on social media

In their answers to our survey, survivors also reflected on the kinds of support available to them, specifically in response to the problems they told us they experienced social media. In some cases, they felt the support they received had been helpful and they appreciated the direct actions of others to address and resolve issues. However, for over half of survivors, this support was not enough and many felt re-traumatised by the actions of others.

6.1. Support available to survivors

Survivors identified a wide range of people and sources that provided them with support related to their issues on social media. Responses (from the 26 survivors who answered this question) are shown in Figure 12 below, demonstrating that family and friends were the main providers of support for over half of survivors, followed by victim organisations, police and other survivors.

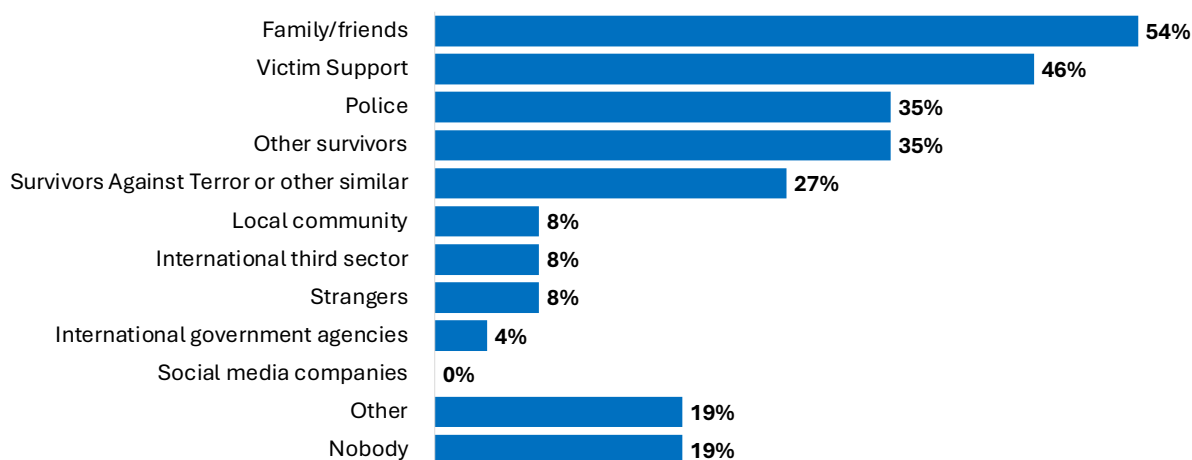


Figure 12: Sources of support identified by survivors

Of specific note here is that for 19% of survivors (N=5), no support was provided, either by individuals or organisations. Linked to this is that although it was an option, no survivors (0%) selected social media companies as a source of support, despite problems on social media being the reason support was needed. This is likely linked to the issue of trust identified in the previous section, where 17 survivors reported their trust in social media companies was impacted: if social media companies did nothing to support survivors, it is unsurprising to see trust issues emerge.

For the 21 survivors who indicated they did receive support, this was largely emotional, although other types were also identified (and survivors could select more than one option), as summarised in Figure 13.



*referring to issues on social media and other media.

Figure 13: Types of support received by survivors

Survivors were invited to elaborate on this by describing the **one thing** they found most helpful. The examples below map onto a number of the support sources and types identified above, from simple acts such as turning off the TV to help survivors avoid triggering content, to cups of tea and biscuits from volunteers:

- “ *My family would turn off any media about the event if it came up (Respondent 22)*
- “ *Police Family Liaison Officers. Toby and Sue, our FLOs, were brilliant. They were with us from the day of the attack until after the inquest, two years later. They advised me on the day of the attack to stay off social media. I ignored them, but I don't regret it. (Respondent 25)*
- “ *Getting access to EMDR therapy (Respondent 30)*
- “ *During blood collection at [the city park] immediately following the first day of the attack, a cup of tea, biscuits, and kind words and hug from the Salvation Army is unforgettable. Members of my local church congregation responded as they could. (Respondent 45)*

In a number of cases, the examples indicated a direct *action* or specific *intervention* from a person/agency was helpful, including:

- “ *The family liaison officers were exceptional in the first few months especially dealing with the media (Respondent 4)*
- “ *The police were able to move journalists along which camped outside my mother's house and months later, victim support contacted journalists for me to tell them not to contact me (Respondent 42)*
- “ *Neil Basu taking down images of my husband lay killed (Respondent 11)*
- “ *Scraping of harassment contents on Twitter to provide them to the police (Respondent 19)*

As these examples indicate, survivors appreciated support from someone who took responsibility for putting a stop to the social media issues (and sometimes broader media issues). Another example of a positive intervention is seen in the quote below, centred on a pro-bono legal organisation contacting social media companies. However, the *need* to use a legal firm in this case highlights a more ingrained problem:

- “ *A pro bono legal firm helped by sending strongly worded letters to some social media companies, which helped to get a few posts taken down. Most companies still ignored us though. (Respondent 36)*

Although the action of the legal firm is itself a positive thing, it is disappointing that social media companies needed this level of intervention before responding (if at all). This survivor was subject to crisis actor accusations following the attack affecting them, and in a number of cases, crisis actor accusations eventually led to death threats. The lack of willingness from social media companies to act and remove this content becomes even more problematic against this backdrop of threats and trauma for survivors. While in this case, a legal firm were available to intervene and were successful with some companies, there were evidently other companies that either did not consider it their responsibility to remove content, or simply did not care. It is also worth noting that this specific legal firm carried out their work for free – in the likely event that this continues to happen in future, survivors would either have to be lucky enough to find a similar firm to do this for them free of charge, or take on the financial burden of paying for it themselves. At a time when survivors are injured or bereaved, as well as traumatised, the idea that they would have to engage a legal firm to get any response from social media companies is highly concerning.

6.2. Problems with support and re-traumatisation

Although many survivors indicated they received support in response to social media problems, there were a number of cases where this was either lacking or inadequate. We asked **whether the level of support available to them aligned with their needs** at the time: for 59% (N=16) of the 27 survivors who answered this question, it did **not**. For some, the actions of others *reinforced* the trauma they were experiencing as a result of social media, rather than alleviating it. Of the 27 responses to this question, strangers, social media companies and police were selected most often, as shown in Figure 14.

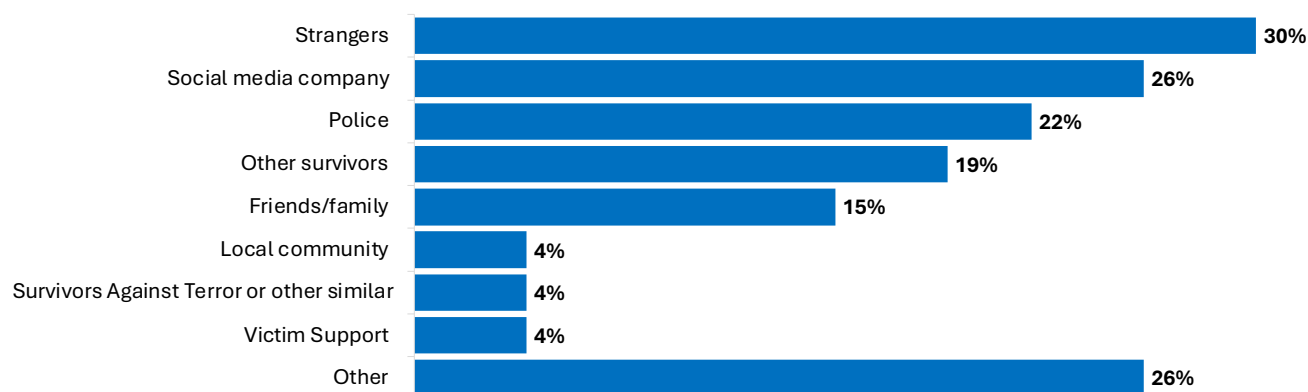


Figure 14: Individuals and organisations whose actions reinforced survivors' trauma

The prominence of strangers and social media companies in the responses to this question reinforces the findings outlined in previous sections that survivors are especially impacted by these groups/organisations. Particularly where social media companies (and police) are concerned, they are in theory in a position where they can take action to help survivors, but these responses indicate that the opposite was true in a number of cases. It is also worth noting that the actions of other survivors and friends/family were re-traumatising for some respondents too, however, indicating that poor experiences can sometimes emerge closer to home.

We asked survivors to elaborate on these issues in more detail, and to tell us what reinforced the trauma in their own words. The first example below captures one survivor's poor experiences with a range of organisations, indicating missed opportunities and failures on multiple 'fronts':

“ I received countless death threats, harassment and mockery online, and media companies did little to combat it when I asked for help. [...] Police said it "wasn't in the public interest" to prosecute "someone sending death threats to myself and my friends for being 'crisis actors'", and refused to arrest him despite having all the evidence. Victim Support sent me a rape whistle in the post and told me to activate this if approached by any of these conspiracy theorists, only making me more afraid for my wellbeing. (Respondent 36)

Various other examples of 're-traumatising' experiences emerged and are included below. They can be summarised as online trolling and encountering attack-related content.

“ The tabloid press was appalling; if you look online, you can still find those horrible articles. As a result of their stories, I lost my job, my singing contract, and my home. [...] The trolls online believing everything the Tabloids wrote about me using that as a foundation to have a go at me. (Respondent 2)

“ So called "re information" blogs, or alternative media, and far right influencers (Respondent 19)

“ Friends and family were constantly reminding and repeating the incident and it's affects on me. Also strangers would recognise me and remind me of the attack (Respondent 23)

Case study: social media filling the support void

With the problems and gaps in professional support identified by survivors, connections through social media – seemingly – ‘fill’ the void at times. But as example below shows, this is not always a positive thing and is no substitute for the expert advice and support survivors need.

It worries me, some of those online support groups after terrorism, because I just think they could be really detrimental as well. The majority of the time, it's people offering support to each other, but sometimes, people can kind of bring out the negative energy in each other and then they can exacerbate it. I think it's quite easy for vulnerable young people to gravitate towards others in a similar situation, and actually, that's not what they need. They need someone more professional who's able to support them.

Or meeting in person, because being up in the middle of the night and chatting to people, some of the reactions and responses became almost ‘catching’. So, if people were saying, “well, I can't, possibly go out and where there's fireworks” for example – that was one of the big ones – it was like, “well, you're not a good enough survivor if you're OK with all this stuff like fireworks.” It almost becomes a competition of who's more traumatised. And young people were just going on all sorts of sites and chatting with all sorts of random people, and we know that anybody can get on these groups really. Journalists and people were getting themselves on those groups.

- Interview with survivor (3)

Section 7: Responsibilities and potential solutions

So far in this report, we have focused on the wide range of social media-driven problems and challenges faced by terror survivors following attacks. In this final section, we present survivors' views on what could be done – and by who – to improve the situation in future.

First, we asked respondents to select the agencies they thought were best placed to influence the treatment of survivors following terror attacks (Figure 15). All 46 survivors who took part in the survey answered this question, with social media companies being selected most often (65%), followed by police (43%).

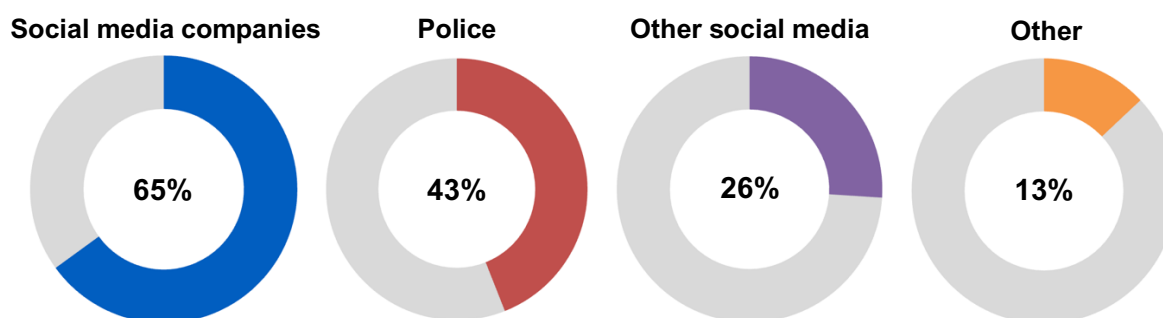


Figure 15: Agencies perceived by survivors' to be best placed to influence treatment on social media following terror attacks

Reflecting on their experiences of support, and the problems or gaps in what was available to them, survivors went on to share their thoughts on what could be done to improve the situation related to social media following terror attacks. We received a large number of suggestions, which can be grouped into four main themes: strengthening general social media (and media) guidelines; formal support for survivors; managing misinformation and hate speech, and; content warnings.

Strengthening social media/media guidelines. For many survivors, strengthening the guidelines that regulate social media (and traditional media) companies was the clearest route to resolving the problems outlined in this report. Many of the issues and harms faced by survivors are – in theory – now covered by the Online Safety Act 2023, which gives Ofcom several relevant powers, including to develop guidance and codes of practice setting out how platforms will meet their duties. The implementation of the Act has been phased, but the new offences it introduced are now in effect – they include threatening communications, and sending false information intended to cause non-trivial harm.⁹ But it is still not entirely clear what *duties* have been placed on online platforms for content that is not illegal ('harmful but legal'), such as disinformation.¹⁰ For instance, large 'Category 1' services will be required to remove all content that breaches their own Terms of Service, which can include disinformation, though this is yet to come into force.¹¹ Although it is hoped the introduction of this Act will improve the situation for survivors on social media, robust enforcement – and possibly secondary legislation and other guidelines – will be vital.

The Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub recently promised by the Home Office (and discussed further below) could complement this regulation, with expertise and specialism to help survivors if they encounter social media content that breaches the Online Safety Act. Indeed, many of the suggestions from survivors about regulating social media overlap with the need for enhanced support and a quicker response to problems they encounter. For example, having personal photos/videos taken from social media pages

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>

¹⁰ Law (2025)

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>

without consent, as outlined in section 3.2, was a problem that many survivors identified as needing a more effective regulatory response. Other survivors focused on the content of reporting, pointing towards the responsibilities of journalists, both on social media and in traditional media. This included calls for perpetrator identities not to be publicised, and for more respectful reporting:

“ To not put filmed footage out there with victims/people on (we walked in through the front door from hospital and the first thing we saw was footage from the night of myself and daughter running down the stairs and into the train station) as it can cause serious triggers. (Respondent 13)

“ The government should prevent it from happening. There should be support for victims, the media should record enough videos to give people information which would be more supportive to the victims so that the public don't post their possibly graphic bystander videos. – Interview with survivor (1)

“ Don't name the perpetrator or show any photos of them. They should remain nameless. (Respondent 28)

Formal support for survivors. As suggested above, survivors felt a fundamental aspect of managing their problems on social media was getting access to appropriate support. Findings presented earlier (section 6.1) demonstrated that formal support – through therapy, police, or victim support services for example – was often most useful, but not always consistently available to all who took part in this research. This lack of consistent support was highlighted by our Survivors' Charter in 2022, and a recent review published by the Home Office has promised a Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub will be implemented to address this gap.¹²

As noted by the Home Office review, “victims and survivors should receive more support in handling interest from the public and the media”.¹³ This echoes the experiences shared by many survivors in this research, and recognises that when an attack takes place, both the public and the media will have a strong interest in the lives of people affected. Support for survivors might therefore include helping them to engage with social media if they feel able, for example to organise events and community groups. Linked to the calls for stronger regulation above, others suggested the Hub should be “advising on strategies to manage intrusion” (Respondent 46), as well as helping survivors to respond to disturbing or malicious contact on social media. The value of having this support is highlighted by the quotations below:

“ If you're going to have like a caseworker, they can tell you about some of the pitfalls [of social media] – or some of the great things – but some of the pitfalls. Or even having something online that says, you know, be careful of these things [...] And having somebody that you can show things to. [...] Even if you had a support worker who said 'actually this meets the thresholds for us to talk to the police'. – Interview with survivor (3)

“ I think it's really, really worrying, and sad really, for people that there isn't more in the way of support because it's just so easy for people to post on social media and people don't think about the damage that it can cause. I think a part of that survivors hub would have to be about how to handle the media, it's someone to defer to and say is this a trusted source? If it's not, you know, what do I do? Do I just block them? Do I engage? You know, I think it's just having someone to turn to, isn't it? And you know someone whose expertise it is to understand this type of thing, rather than all of us thinking, 'what the hell do we do with this?' you know? – Interview with survivor (2)

¹² Survivors Against Terror (2022); Home Office (2025)

¹³ Home Office (2025)

Managing misinformation and hate speech. Other suggestions from survivors centred around the need to better manage misinformation and hate speech circulating in the aftermath of terror attacks. This report has highlighted numerous examples where hateful content and misinformation, either about attacks or targeting individual survivors, has been traumatising, and this was clearly an area where survivors wanted to see improvement. The detrimental effects for survivors, who have already experienced significant trauma and are in a vulnerable position following attacks, demonstrate the importance of responding to this problem:

“ Having survived the attack and made our way back to our rented apartment I tried to determine exactly what happened and if there was further risk to my family and others. I therefore scoured news websites and social media to find out. Much of the early information was false including suggestions of gunmen at large in the city. This only added to the families’ trauma. (Respondent 8)

“ [Users/companies should] not exploit with false socially constructed narratives to sensationalise an immediate media story when an individual is at their lowest and vulnerable (Respondent 37)

“ I then read this terrible terrible page about [him] which was just awful- some guy just writing false stuff completely. And then people that exacerbate hatred- the Muslim hatred stuff- isn’t helpful either. (Respondent 38)

Importantly, the duty to remove content containing hate speech or constituting harassment is already included in the Terms of Service of many large social media companies. However, research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate has found widespread failure by platforms to adhere to these policies. For example, in a 2021 study of antisemitic content on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok, platforms failed to act on 84% of reports of anti-Jewish hate.¹⁴ A similar study in 2025, which set out to test X’s enforcement of its content rules on calls for violence against migrants or Muslims, found the platform failed to act on 97% of posts that were reported.¹⁵ While the Online Safety Act’s requirement for large platforms to enforce such Terms of Service is yet to be enforced, these examples indicate that stringent enforcement will be necessary to affect change.

Other responses to harmful content, such as conspiracies and misinformation about attacks on social media, has included ‘labelling’ through community notes added by users. This kind of labelling aims to make users critical readers of news, adding context and potentially challenging the claims being made in posts, but there is mixed evidence about how effective they are. On the one hand, some have found they reduce the sharing of misinformation, but others point to backfire effects, including an ‘implied truth effect’ for posts that aren’t labelled. In other words, users might uncritically accept the claims of posts when they are not (yet) labelled.¹⁶ Labels might also inadvertently increase engagement with a misinformation post, and reduce overall trust in other, factually correct, professional journalism.¹⁷

Some who took part in our survey called for “*checks that content is factual*” (Respondent 18), pointing to the responsibilities of social media companies for confirming claims shared on their platforms. ‘Fact checking’ is already a practice used by some platforms to respond to misinformation and ‘fake news’ on social media. For example, journalistic fact-checking involves professional journalists carefully verifying a widely shared claim, then giving a verdict on its accuracy.¹⁸ Although evidence on effectiveness is again mixed, recent evidence indicates journalistic fact-checking could help to mitigate the impact of fake content.¹⁹ For a number of years, Facebook has had a large, global fact-checking programme that involves referring false or misleading posts

¹⁴ Center for Countering Digital Hate (2021)

¹⁵ Center for Countering Digital Hate (2025)

¹⁶ Ibid. Bradshaw et al. (2023)

¹⁷ Zannettou (2021); Bradshaw et al. (2023)

¹⁸ Dan (2025)

¹⁹ Ibid.

to independent organisations.²⁰ After assessing their credibility, posts can be flagged as inaccurate, have information labels attached to them, and be moved lower in users' 'feeds'. However, in a heavily criticised move, Facebook recently stopped this practice in the US in favour of 'community notes' added by users, rather than professional fact-checkers.²¹ Although the same has not happened in the UK (to date), there are concerns that this general direction of travel might reduce the capacity to respond to misinformation.

Content warnings. Five survivors shared a feeling that social media platforms, particularly in the immediate aftermath of terror attacks, should increase their usage of sensitive content warnings. A form of content warning function is already available on most popular platforms but is applied inconsistently. For example, on X (formerly Twitter), account holders can mark their content as 'sensitive' if it contains violence. This hides the media and means other users must deliberately click 'show' to reveal the content in full, but it mostly relies on the post 'authors' marking their own content.²² Other technology companies, such as Apple, offer features that detect graphic content, and once turned on, they automatically blur graphic media and provide a warning to users.²³ More use of this function would benefit a broad audience of users not wanting to see graphic content, but for survivors specifically, there was a sense this would give them more control during an especially sensitive and difficult time:

“ Give content warnings before showing specific media, allowing people to filter specific content or automatically filtering things and asking viewer to grant access before showing. (Respondent 5)

“ Imagery and videos should come with a warning before it shows you, as scrolling down social media to see imagery of the attack is shocking and immensely triggering. (Respondent 22)

Others suggested platforms could directly prompt users to use 'trigger word filters' in the aftermath of attacks, specifying words they would not want to see in their feeds, such as 'terrorist'. However, the effectiveness of these filters has already been questioned, partly because they could hide important official updates if they contain certain keywords a user has blocked,²⁴ but also because harmful posts that do not contain specific words would not be filtered out. More importantly, prompting survivors to use 'trigger word filters' would shift responsibility for harmful social media content further away from social media companies, and still leaves problematic content unaddressed.

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly74mpy8klo>

²¹ Ibid.

²² <https://help.x.com/en/rules-and-policies/media-settings>

²³ <https://support.apple.com/en-gb/105071>

²⁴ Macdonald et al. (2019)

Section 8: Conclusions and recommendations

This research has found that, at a time of shock, distress and grief, social media presents a profound challenge for survivors of terror attacks. Not only does it mean survivors may be unexpectedly exposed to content about the attack, with images and videos posted online reminding them of their traumatic experiences and loss, but social media can lead to various forms of intrusion for many survivors.

Being contacted via personal messages or friend requests and having personal photos and videos taken and shared elsewhere, without consent, were common. In some cases, survivors were subjected to malicious contact, being personally sent disturbing content or death threats by strangers online. Conspiracy theories and crisis actor accusations drove this kind of threatening contact in a number of cases, where survivors were accused of faking their injuries or loss of loved ones. The re-traumatisation and re-victimisation of survivors at such a vulnerable time causes a 'double damage' that is highly concerning.

Although such negative experiences were not universal, with some survivors reporting they found positivity in the ability to share their perspectives on social media, consent played a crucial role here. It was those who *chose* to engage and *chose* to share their story who had some positive reflections, but this was uncommon overall. In most cases, experiences on social media led to further trauma, worry and upset, impacting survivors' everyday lives and the trust they felt towards others.

Unwillingness from social media companies to take action, as well as gaps in professional support, mean survivors are often alone in dealing with these problems. While a number of survivors commended the support they received from loved ones and support services, such as Victim Support and Police Family Liaison Officers, this did not always mean problems on social media could be fully resolved. Even when legal action was pursued by one survivor in an effort to get harmful social media posts taken down, there was still pushback from platforms.

Based on this research evidence, we present a series of recommendations to three key audiences: **regulators and policymakers, social media companies, and the public**. Each audience has a different but **crucial** role to play in improving the situation facing survivors of terrorism that we have revealed in this report.

Recommendations

Recommendations to regulators and policymakers:

- Ofcom must act. They need to robustly enforce all aspects of the Online Safety Act, including the illegal content and protection of children codes. Ofcom must also enforce social media platforms' duties to adhere to their own Terms of Service, when this comes into force. Without holding platforms to account with strong regulation and oversight, harmful content will continue to spread, and communities will continue to face the kinds of hate and threats highlighted in this report.
- Government should amend the Online Safety Act to address the standards of social media platforms' Terms of Service. Specifically, we recommend the introduction of minimum standards for Terms of Service, as well as a "no rolling back" requirement, so that users are offered the equivalent or greater protection to that at the time of OSA Royal Assent.²⁵

²⁵ This recommendation echoes calls from the Online Safety Act Network (2025).

- Ofcom must strengthen new duties in their additional safety measures, mandating platforms to introduce crisis response protocols. Ofcom should provide clear guidelines and standards for what a robust crisis response requirement for social media and technology companies should look like, ensuring they have processes in place to respond appropriately to events such as terror attacks. For example, well-resourced content moderation teams and a requirement to introduce friction in algorithms to reduce the virality of harmful content following tragedies. The algorithms currently used by social media companies amplify harmful and incendiary content, including false and hateful information. Companies should be required to intervene to stop this algorithmic amplification, and to put systems and teams in place to respond.²⁶
- In the early stages of implementing the Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub, Government should consult and work with experts in social media. Government must ensure the Hub is sufficiently equipped to provide advice to survivors, including how to manage social media and media intrusion in the aftermath of attacks. Interest in survivors' stories is almost inevitable, and the Hub should be in a position to support them through this, including psychological support. The Hub should also be prepared to intervene as appropriate on behalf of survivors, when necessary. This includes helping survivors to contact social media platforms to report and get content removed, contacting regulators such as Ofcom, and contacting the police if needed.
- Connected to this, in circumstances where survivors receive threatening communications in the aftermath of terror, a protective security response should be provided. The Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub, in collaboration with the police (e.g. through Family Liaison Officers) and relevant specialist organisations such as Victim Support, should engage closely with survivors to understand their vulnerabilities and needs, ensuring the correct measures are put in place for their safety. Survivors cannot be expected to manage these issues alone, particularly at a time of such trauma.
- The Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub should connect with Ofcom and policy teams from social media platforms to ensure survivors' voices are heard by those tasked with responding to the harm they and others have faced.²⁷
- The Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub must be consistently and sufficiently resourced by Government, so they can provide effective ongoing support in the aftermath of terrorism. The Hub is a valuable investment and is crucial to the wellbeing of victims and survivors.
- Building on recent efforts to increase the flow of information during crises, Government should ensure official social media accounts (such as those of police forces, Home Office) are used to provide timely updates to the public when a terror attack occurs. Regular communication will help to prevent an information 'void' opening up, which misinformation and disinformation is more likely to 'fill'. This important task should be carefully managed by the relevant police and government press offices.
- Related to this, Government should work with social media platforms to ensure that content from official bodies, public authorities and/or law enforcement is prominently displayed and promoted during crisis periods.

²⁶ This echoes calls from the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2024).

²⁷ Elsewhere, this has been described as 'survivor-informed policy design', emphasising the importance of including survivors' voices in the policies and solutions designed to protect them (see Tech Against Terrorism, 2025a).

- Government and Ofcom must design and implement a strategy to increase media literacy among the public, particularly those who use social media for news. There is a clear need to improve public understanding of social media algorithms, and how they determine what content appears in news feeds, including ‘harmful but legal’ material. There is also a need to improve the public's ability to identify mis- and disinformation, and their understanding of how to report fake/harmful content when they see it. We recognise the recent announcement about plans to include this in the education curriculum in England,²⁸ but there should also be an effort to raise awareness and understanding of these issues among the wider public, and across all four UK nations.

Recommendations to social media companies:

- Design and implement a robust crisis response plan. This must include well-supported content moderation teams, with dedicated resources to support a more proactive response to tragedies, such as terror attacks. This should include improved content detection, human moderation and keyword monitoring.²⁹ Our research shows a specific need to be more responsive when users report harmful or false content, taking action to remove the posts and/or the responsible users where necessary.
- Specifically, footage of terror attacks that has been produced by attackers/terrorist groups has no place on social media. It must be swiftly identified and removed.
- Embed a ‘safety by design’ approach to combat the virality of harmful content. Within this design, systems should be in place to introduce ‘friction’ that reduces the algorithmic amplification of harmful and incendiary content.³⁰
- In advance of the Online Safety Act duties coming into force, platforms must adhere to and enforce their own Terms of Service, taking clear responsibility for the harmful content being posted and shared on social media platforms. Within this, platforms should commit to not ‘rolling back’ on their safety and security measures. This problem is not going away, and a more robust response is essential, because we know this content causes significant distress.
- Designate the Victims and Survivors of Terrorism Support Hub as a trusted flagger, ensuring a quick response to the harmful online content those they support may encounter.
- Establish a dedicated escalation processes for survivors and victim groups, during and after terrorist incidents. In the event that members of these groups experience threats or other forms of malicious communications in future, this will provide a clear pathway for groups to follow.
- Make it easier for users to quickly ‘hibernate’ their accounts. For survivors of terrorism, who are often subjected to contact from strangers online following their attacks, this would enable them to better protect and shield themselves from unwanted contact and harassment.
- Increase and ensure consistent use of graphic content warnings and/or content blurring for sensitive content, as per the duties to combat illegal content and protect child users through the Online Safety Act. This function is already being used by some companies on their platforms or devices, but not all,

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-curriculum-to-give-young-people-the-skills-for-life-and-work>

²⁹ Tech Against Terrorism (2025b) recently called for similar action and improvements in response to attack footage.

³⁰ This recommendation again echoes calls from the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2024).

and there is a need for consistency to better protect users, and for this to be promoted after terror attacks.

- Conduct post-crisis reviews to consider how well the response was managed, identify any shortcomings, and implement lessons to improve crisis response systems in future. Reviews should include an element of algorithmic transparency, enabling wider stakeholders (e.g. researchers, policymakers) to understand the trajectory of harmful content.
- Collaborate with specialist charities and networks – including but not limited to Survivors Against Terror – to support the development of safer online environments.³¹ For example, ensuring specialist training for content moderators to help them understand the distressing effects of harmful social media content. Member networks, such as Survivors Against Terror, can support this kind of work by sharing invitations with members.

Recommendations to the public:

- If you see harmful social media content such as harassment, hate speech, or calls for violence, report it to platforms. While there have been issues with this in the past, we can help to hold companies to account for the content on their platforms as more powers come into force under the Online Safety Act.
- Don't engage with posts from 'influencers' and other online accounts who share harmful content. Social media companies are driven by advertising revenue, and their algorithms are designed to promote content that receives high engagement, whether positive or negative, and so minimising our engagement with harmful content will help to stop its spread.
- As members of the public, we should remember the impact that our posts can have on others, especially survivors of terror attacks. We have a responsibility not to post or share harmful content, or to intrude on people's privacy. We need to be empathetic and remember that images and videos of attacks happening, or of injured victims, are upsetting and can be re-traumatising for those who were there, or who lost loved ones.
- Use government, police or other official social media pages and websites to get updates in the immediate aftermath of terror attacks – this is where confirmed facts will be published, when they are available. If you usually get your information from other pages or websites, ensure to use multiple different sources that give a range of opinions. It can take time for details about attacks and their causes to become clear, and some people take advantage of this confusion to increase tension and distrust in communities.

³¹ Including survivors' perspectives in the design of social media solutions has likewise been recommended by groups including Tech Against Terrorism (2025a).

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