

Press Release

REPORT HARMFUL CONTENT RELEASES 2021 REPORT: THROUGH THESE WALLS

National service, sees a worrying rise in reported cases, but improved public understanding of identifying and relating incidents to official bodies.

- Staggering 292% increase in harmful content cases reported
 - One in three incidents involved bullying or harassment
 - Concerning 225% increase in 'hate speech' reported
- Domestic Abuse trend finds 75% of perpetrators personally known to the victim, and three-quarters of reports made by women

Today, [Report Harmful Content](#) (RHC), a national and impartial online content dispute resolution service, announces the launch of its 2021 state-of-the-nation report: '[Through These Walls](#)'.

RHC's remit is around harmful but legal online content and this remains a persistent and problematic legal grey area which needs to be addressed at policy level.

Central to this year's findings, is the **massive 292% increase in harmful content incidents reported**, compared to the same period 2019/2020.

Through These Walls seeks to get to the heart of harmful content reporting over the past year, not only regarding harmful content proliferation during COVID-19 lockdown, but also public attitudes towards identifying and raising incidents with an official dispute resolution service.

The report offers a detailed look into the particular types of harmful content flagged, and a breakdown and analysis of the most common forms.

Across-the-board Increases

- From the 644 unique reports logged during 2020-2021, **almost a third involved bullying and harassment**, whilst a quarter highlighted pornography.
- Impersonation, violent content and intimate image abuse were other repeat offenders, whilst **associated complaints of 'hate speech' rose by 225%**.
- Overwhelmingly, **75% of domestic abuse reports were made by women and 54% were aged between 19-30**.
- A proportion also **concerned malicious activity by a former, or current, intimate partner**.

On a more positive note, of the reports logged with RHC, **90% of the content escalated to industry was successfully actioned and removed**, indicating the right tools do exist to report and resolve these distressing events for victims.

Commenting on the findings, Report Harmful Content's Manager Kathryn Tremlett, says, "Although the report indicates the web is still awash with harmful and inappropriate content, it is a positive sign public awareness around this important issue is increasing. Although these findings indicate an urgent need to better regulate online content and protect internet users, they also show that bodies like RHC are efficacious in giving redress for victims by getting these disputes raised and resolved.

She continues, "It will surprise no one that this is just the tip of a much larger iceberg, which needs more exposure. It's our ongoing aim to offer a channel for the public to raise their

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concerns directly with industry, where legal routes don't currently exist or reporting channels on platforms aren't proving effective. COVID-19, and more time spent online, has thrown this into the spotlight, prompting the need for a wider discussion. As such, the UK Government's recent Online Safety Bill represents a welcome opportunity to move the conversation on."

Wider findings from the report are explored in more detail below:

Personal Connection

One finding which particularly stood out was that, in the cluster of harassment, domestic abuse and coercive control in three-quarters of cases, **the perpetrator was known by the person experiencing the abuse.**

Worryingly, a large number of cases concerned **privacy violation involving an ex-partner or an ex-partner's current partner** hacking an old social media account and posting private, often intimate, content.

This unpleasant statistic correlates with last year's news of an **87% rise in cases** reported on the [Revenge Porn Helpline](#)¹.

The findings show this is a problem on the rise, needing to be urgently addressed.

***Case Study:** One notable incident involved a Pakistani woman pictured in bed with her husband with her head and shoulders bare and duvet over the rest of her. She consented to the selfie being taken by her husband but did not consent to it being shared online. Her husband went against her wishes and shared the image on various social media platforms as a form of controlling behaviour. This caught the attention of Pakistani conservative media outlets in both Pakistan and England, causing significant distress to the woman concerned and threats of being ostracised from her community made by wider family members upon site of the content. RHC have helped her to remove just short of 300 images and videos from media accounts and pages on commonly used social networking sites.*

The Hate Factor

The Through These Walls Report also identified **a significant increase in hate speech, with a 225% rise** in the issue being flagged, in conjunction with an associated complaint.

Those reporting this type of content were overwhelmingly either bystanders or observers (75%) opposed to the victim themselves.

This increase in reporting over the last year can, in part, be attributed to a greater awareness around 'hate speech' issues in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matters protests in Summer 2020.

Furthermore, RHC also launched a dedicated 'Negate the Hate' resource across UK universities in Autumn 2020, which registered **a sharp increase of 34% in active 'hate speech' reporting in the student community.**

It highlights a growing sensitivity around particular social issues nationwide, particularly in younger demographics.

***Case Study:** A case concerning a repeat client, a mother, whose child (aged 2 at the time) features in a video, reports resurfacing of content after specific events relating to racism. The video recirculated again after the latest resurgence in the BLM movement in summer 2020.*

¹ <https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/news/2020-hindsight/>

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The content involves a member of the extended family encouraging a toddler to recite a well-known racist chant, and always triggers an outcry from the general public, parent shaming and calling for social services to get involved. In reality the incident was dealt with at the time, it occurred nearly 7 years ago. Every time the content resurfaces, this triggers a PTSD response from the mother who is increasingly concerned about how the content will impact her child's future when they eventually do find out. To date RHC has helped the family to remove approx 500 instances of the video

Search and Find

The Report uncovered an emerging trend amongst young males actively searching for harmful content, then reporting it.

It found, particularly in the 19-30 year age bracket, that **men were twice-as-likely to be searching for harmful pornographic content than women** (66% of men vs 34% of women).

One potential explanation for this trend could be that these young men are reporting this content as a way to alleviate and manage the guilt they feel about accessing it.

This indicates a wider problem around the relationship young men have with pornography, correlating with a number of recent academic studies on the subject.

RHC believes more research should be done in this field in order to understand whether guilt is driving young men to report pornography in order to manage their feelings.

Case Study: *A repeat male client aged between 19-30 reports content on independent sites, which is explicit in nature and often features torture/snuff content and narratives depicting CSA. The client will use different email addresses each time to try and retain anonymity, but the alias used stays the same along with the style of report so RHC have concerns that they are actively searching out this type of content. The organisation flagged this with the relevant law enforcement body at the time.*

To access the full 'Through These Walls' Report [Click Here](#)

RHC is provided by [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) and operated by [SWGfL](#).

It currently works in collaboration with some of the best known online platforms, including: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Roblox, TikTok, Discord, Twitch, Match Group, Microsoft and Google.

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For further media information please contact Henry Rubinstein (henryr@thinktank.org.uk) or Archit Chopra (architc@thinktank.org.uk) at The Think Tank or call 0207 831 225.

Appendix 1. How to report harmful content

Reporting Harmful Content (RHC) offers a safe, impartial and effective platform to report harmful content and can be found at www.reportharmfulcontent.com

In simple terms, harmful content is anything online which causes a person distress or harm, but is not necessarily illegal. This encompasses a huge amount of content and can be very subjective depending on the viewer i.e. what may be harmful to one person might not be considered an issue by someone else.

RHC's dedicated website offers two simple channels which allows users to report harmful content and access advice on where to report it.

It Empowers anyone who has come across harmful content online to officially raise it by providing up to date information on community standards and direct links to the correct reporting facilities across multiple platforms.

Following submission, RHC aims to respond to your enquiry within 72 hours, however it may take longer to fully investigate and resolve the incident. If the team can't help resolve the matter, wherever possible they will explain why it is not possible to seek mediation and put the reporter in touch with people who can provide wraparound support.

In instances where harmful content becomes criminal content, advice and signposting, including referrals, where appropriate, are made.

For more information and to report a case of harmful online content [click here](#).

Notes to Editor

About SWGfL

SWGfL (www.swgfl.org.uk) is a charitable trust working with schools and other organisations to provide safe and secure online access and resources. SWGfL has developed an international reputation within online safety. It is a founding member of UKCCIS (UK Council for Child Internet Safety) and has spoken at conferences across Europe, America and Africa.

SWGfL, alongside partners Childnet and Internet Watch Foundation, lead the UK Safer Internet Centre (UKSIC) as part of the European Commission's Connecting Europe Facility. UKSIC is the national awareness Centre: responsible for raising the nation's attention to online safety issues as well as managing online criminal content and supporting professionals via its unique helpline. The UK Safer Internet Centre stands to lose 50% of its funding and will no longer be in receipt of any funding from Government sources after 1 January 2022 after its EU grant funding ends. Without some form of Government funding, a number of key online safety initiatives are at risk, including the work of Report Harmful Content.