

Risky research and researcher risk: Reflecting on emotionally involved information research through the lens of COVID-19.

Alison Hicks ^[0000-0002-2124-1730]

*Department of Information Studies, UCL, London, UK
a.hicks@ucl.ac.uk*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper will draw upon recent research into COVID-19 information practices to discuss the experience of studying risk from a researcher perspective, including the impact that emotionally engaged scholarship might have upon information science. Conceptions of risk play a prominent role within society, but they have generally been studied from a quantitative, positivist perspective that prioritises objective calculation and expert judgement (e.g., Beck, 1992). A growing recognition that the concept of risk must be understood as socially and culturally shaped (Douglas, 1992) has led to the rise of more qualitative explorations of risk, including within information studies (Hicks, 2019). However, studying risk, which may refer to dangers or hazards faced by a community, introduces a variety of methodological challenges, including the potential to expose researchers to the need to navigate sensitive and emotional narratives. This paper will use recent (and ongoing) research into COVID information practices, including in relation to lockdown, illness and vaccines, as a lens to discuss emotionally engaged online research. Themes that will be discussed include invasive co-presence and therapeutic detachment, which reflect the affective implications of carrying out risk research within a socially-distanced setting.

These themes were identified from notes and memos that I kept while carrying out empirical COVID-19 research during 2020-21. I additionally reflected on these ideas with my research partner where we discussed the value and the impact of these feelings to our research. These discussions were supplemented by a review of literature examining researcher wellbeing and health within sensitive research contexts. The COVID-19 research that formed the basis for this reflexive engagement started in May 2020 and is ongoing until 2022. Employing one-on-one unstructured interviews with over 35 participants and a risk theoretical framework, this research is examining the information practices of people in the UK in relation to COVID-19 lockdowns, illness and vaccination. Findings from the first study indicated that transition into new pandemic information environments was shaped by an unfolding phase, an intensification phase, and a stable phase and that information literacy constituted a form of safeguarding that mitigated health, legal, financial and well-being risks produced by the pandemic (Lloyd & Hicks, 2021).

This paper's contribution lies in its extended consideration of the methodological implications of studying emotional topics, including the push to engage with new forms of knowledge production. Everyday contexts play an increasingly prominent role within

information studies research (Savolainen, 2007; Hartel, 2006). The recognition that these settings are mediated by increasingly diffused information and communication technologies means that information research has also started to grapple with the methodological implications of carrying out everyday research, including the possibility of constituting fieldwork in terms of co-presence rather than co-location (Beaulieu, 2010; Barriage & Hicks, 2020). However, most work that has advocated for the building of co-presence has focused on non-sensitive organisational contexts, and there has been little consideration of the impact that the push to build meaningful presence within risk research might have on the researcher. The value of this paper consequently lies in the work that it does to extend methodological conversations about everyday research methods, including the challenges that are involved in mediating sensitive online research interactions.

At the same time, the focus on the researcher means that this paper also opens up the field to a broader consideration of the impact that emotion has upon information research, including what emotionally engaged research looks like and the impact of affective practice on the ways in which we understand and negotiate information interactions. These reflections will be of interest to researchers carrying out research into risk, including pandemic, disaster and crisis situations, as well as researchers looking to explore engagement with purposefully or inadvertently sensitive research topics. The socially distanced nature of COVID-19 studies means that this paper will also be of interest to researchers looking to carry out more emotionally responsive online qualitative research.

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