MURAD CODE PROJECT

SUMMARY: OPEN-SOURCE PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO THE MURAD CODE

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INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of the *Open-Source Practitioner's Guide: Applying Minimum Standards for the Safe, Ethical and Effective Gathering and Use of Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence* of November 2025 ("Guide").

The Guide translates the minimum standards of the Murad Code into standards and practices for practitioners who search for or use online digital open-source information and may intentionally or unintentionally handle information related to systematic and conflict-related sexual violence (SCRSV). The Guide is designed to support human rights and criminal investigators, documenters and monitors, journalists, analysts, researchers, activists and others (whether paid or unpaid) who search for or use online digital open-source information and/or who may intentionally or unintentionally come across or handle information related to SCRSV during online inquiries, research, documentation or investigations ("practitioners"). It aims to assist them in recognising and assessing the legal, ethical, human-rights and practical considerations inherent in working with open-source information, and to encourage thoughtful, pre-emptive preparation that reduces the risk of harm to survivors and others while strengthening the effectiveness of the work.

Developed in accordance with **Murad Code Principle 8.3** as part of the Murad Code Project by the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI) and the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law (HRC), in partnership with leading experts, practitioners and survivors, the Guide complements the Murad Code and the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open-Source Investigations (Berkeley Protocol). This executive summary introduces some of the principal concepts contained in the Guide. However, it is critical that anyone who is considering undertaking this work first reads and implements the Murad Code, the Guide and the Berkeley Protocol **before** doing so.

The Guide is divided into four substantive sections, with the first dealing with risks arising from online child sexual abuse or exploitation, and the rest organised to roughly reflect the three phases of digital open-source investigation set out in the Berkeley Protocol. Nothing in the Guide should be read as endorsing open-source inquiry or investigation without responsible preparation. Importantly, the Guide does not encourage or sanction in-person or remote engagement between practitioners and survivors of SCRSV. Such contact is strongly discouraged unless practitioners have the necessary knowledge, demonstrated skills and attitude.

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ONLINE CONTENT DEPICTING CHILDREN

Using online sources to research, document, investigate or otherwise work on SCRSV involves the significant risk of encountering content that may amount to child sexual abuse material (CSAM) or child sexual exploitation material (CSEM). International, regional and national laws criminalise various related acts, including viewing, downloading, making, possessing, storing, transmitting, distributing and sharing such content. The Guide underscores that each act is also an additional violation of the privacy and sexual and bodily integrity/autonomy of the child. Exposure to such content may also cause distress and harm to the viewer. In many jurisdictions, the criminalisation of these acts can also encompass indecent, explicit, or extreme content concerning adults.

Mandatory reporting obligations on the discovery of such material exist in many countries. It is the practitioner's obligation to know the relevant laws and have response and reporting protocols in place. Such protocols may include safeguarding measures, ensuring that practitioners recognise CSAM and CSEM when they encounter it online, and clear instructions on what to do in the event of discovery. The Guide draws a bright ethical line around such material: just because the practitioner can find such information online does not mean they should view or use it. They should not save, screenshot, download, transfer, share or forward internally or externally, or otherwise further engage with the content. They should record only 'non-content' relevant information and notify designated managers or point persons on the team, and immediately contact the relevant law-enforcement agencies as appropriate. The concerns above underscore the importance of adhering to the data minimisation principle set out in the Murad Code throughout an investigation. Practitioners should think carefully before scraping large quantities of data from social media and other online sites and further assess what doing so may mean for their ability to responsibly manage that data.

The Guide also outlines what strong organisational best practice can look like, emphasising the importance of comprehensive risk assessments, clear policies, staff training and ongoing monitoring to ensure compliance. It recommends mandatory training on digital ethics and the legal risks associated with handling SCRSV-related content. The Guide further underscores the need for robust psychological support for investigators and support staff—before, during and after tasking—and calls for secure viewing and restricted-access protocols, including encryption and temporary viewing environments. It encourages organisations to commit to high standards of accountability in safeguarding sensitive materials and promoting staff well-being, and to establish cross-sectoral collaboration models, including partnerships with law enforcement, relevant experts and analysts, and organisations working on missing and exploited children, to ensure ethical and responsible handling of content.

FIRST PHASE: PREPARING FOR THE INVESTIGATION

The Guide emphasises the preparation phase, mirroring the Murad Code's ethos that only with careful preparation can practitioners ensure that their work is safe, effective and survivor-centred. It underscores the Berkeley Protocol's approach to preparation,

encompassing threat and risk assessments and related mitigation measures, (digital) information landscape assessments, and comprehensive investigation planning. The responsibility to make careful and ethical decisions applies throughout the process, including decision-making on whether to undertake the work in the first place.

Being mindful that survivor safety, well-being and dignity outweigh investigative objectives, practitioners need to evaluate how their actions in digital spaces may impact people in other online and offline spaces and take appropriate steps to minimise harm. They should exercise due diligence in analysing digital tools and devices used, the handling and sharing of information, and remain aware of heightened risks to survivors, which can be amplified due to the accessibility and publicly visible nature of digital open-source information, including the possibility of stigmatisation, disownment, loss of employment or worse.

Practitioners should be realistic about potential value added, their own skills, competencies and expertise, budgetary restraints, security limitations or implications of the tools they use, and put in place policies, protocols and systems regarding data protection, information sharing and safeguarding instructions for dealing with potential illegal content.

The Guide underscores the importance of due diligence in identifying and mitigating bias, emphasising understanding of how different people and communities communicate issues of SCRSV, including through coded language, slang, visual cues or other proxy indicators. Biases can be offset by ensuring diversity within investigation teams, engaging in peer review, developing multiple working hypotheses, drawing on lived experience and local and cultural knowledge (including by working with on-the-ground partners), and using varied search terms, platforms, media types and languages. Practitioners must remain diligent regarding their own assumptions—including assumptions about who may be affected by these violations—and apply intersectional analysis to ensure an inclusive approach to persons potentially involved, as well as to the range of harms experienced. By thinking intersectionally, practitioners can better identify how multiple factors - such as legal frameworks, location, connectivity (e.g. internet blackouts), non-access to technology, and the survivor's identity (including gender and sexuality) - may prevent or limit someone's ability to post information and thus skew what gets published online (information gaps).

Practitioners should not assume that open-source 'survivor related' content comes with implied consent to use it – even if the content is public facing. In many cases, if clear, verified consent is absent, the appropriate course is non-use due to the risk of harm to the survivors or others. Practitioners must not contact survivors without having the requisite competencies, undertaking risk assessments and ensuring the necessary safeguards are in place to minimise harm. The Guide outlines instances where consent-focused engagement may be required, and from whom such consent should be sought.

Highlighting ethical considerations around survivor-related content, the Guide outlines key questions that may help minimise confusion surrounding when, from whom and how informed consent should be secured, including: whether the content is survivor-related; confirming the existence and verifying the extent of a survivor's consent; whether the intended use adds value when weighed against the risk of approaching a survivor for their consent; the importance of conducting risk assessments on a person-by-person basis;

establishing who else's consent may be needed; and the importance of review through all phases of the work.

Building on the information provided in the section on online content depicting children, practitioners must exercise heightened caution when handling material that depicts or describes children. They need to be mindful of the child's right to participate in the decision-making process and must handle the identification, collection, analysis and use of related digital open-source information with due care. Accurate age determination and jurisdictional variances in consent laws provide myriad challenges in practice, and deploying child experts on digital investigation teams is paramount. In cases involving CSAM, any contact with a child is the exclusive responsibility of trained law enforcement personnel following rigorous risk assessment and planning.

SECOND PHASE: CONDUCTING THE INVESTIGATION

The Guide highlights seven elements or main phases of the investigation process: (a) state of mind, (b) online inquiry (search/discovery), (c) preliminary assessment and collection, (d) preservation, (e) monitoring, (f) verification and investigative analysis and (g) communicating with survivors and others during an investigation.

The Guide emphasises the importance of having an appropriate state of mind to undertake these investigations. Practitioners are cautioned to avoid gamification and remain alert to the risk of becoming desensitised to the humanity of the people and the harms depicted in the digital material they encounter.

One of the Guide's salient points relates to the identification phase: upon the discovery of indicators of SCRSV, practitioners are advised to pause what they are doing, think about whether they should forward, preserve or otherwise use this information (and the possible implications of doing so), secure expert advice before acting, and act accordingly.

Detailed protocols should be in place for monitoring processes that reduce the risk of harm, including secondary or vicarious trauma, at any point in which new SCRSV material may be discovered. Furthermore, AI-generated and manipulated media, including deep fakes, pose ever-increasing risks, and practitioners should employ rigorous verification methods and robust technical, content and source analysis to assess the authenticity and reliability of digital material.

THIRD PHASE: REPORTING, COMMUNICATING AND OTHER USE

The Guide also provides direction for practitioners who share SCRSV-related information privately or publicly, including within investigation teams, with the public, or in court or other accountability processes. It underscores that respect for survivors and their personal space must extend to their digital spaces, and that survivors must retain control over how their experience is shared, amplified or otherwise used. Internal sharing should be limited to the smallest group possible, with the confidentiality and security of survivor-related

information remaining paramount. Practitioners must always verify and respect the extent and scope of a survivors existing consent. Due diligence and individual risk assessments should guide any sharing with external organisations, and investigators should think carefully about what content or material to use as evidence, given the risk of traumatisation or re-traumatisation to survivors, judges, court personnel and others.

Practitioners must safeguard pre-publication privacy and conduct legal, ethics and security reviews of any information to be published, including via redaction, pseudonyms and other removal of personally identifiable information. Response and mitigation strategies should be in place to deal with any backlash post-publication or other use. Content must always be reviewed for accuracy, stigmatising language or misconceptions around SCRSV and those affected by it. The Guide also emphasises the importance of consistent monitoring and review of practitioner and investigative practices and identifying areas for improvement.

CONCLUSION

SCRSV is widespread yet vastly underreported. With the ubiquity of smartphones and other recording devices, digital open sources now offer critical information, including SCRSV-related information, for contextual, base and linkage evidence that may strengthen the evidentiary foundations of human rights and criminal cases, fact-finding reports, advocacy briefs, news reports and more. While offering advantages, the use of digital open-source SCRSV-related information has the potential to cause myriad harms, including violations of survivors' rights to privacy and dignity—not only through perpetrators' postings but also through the sharing, amplification, or other use of such content by practitioners. It is therefore imperative that the work is undertaken by centring the interests and rights of the survivor. The Guide, preferably used alongside the Murad Code and the Berkeley Protocol, is an indispensable resource that can help practitioners to ensure effective and survivor-centred investigations. Its guidance should be integrated into all efforts to investigate SCRSV and other violations and crimes to ensure that minimum standards are met.

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