In the UK, almost 70% of people have witnessed harmful content online. The sheer magnitude of the problem means that regulators and policy makers are increasingly in need of AI-powered tools to automatically detect and monitor toxic online content. A tool that’s leading the way is the Turing’s Online Harms Observatory, a platform created by the public policy programme’s online safety team that this year shone a light on one of the most targeted groups: Premier League footballers.

The team’s report, published in August 2022 in collaboration with Ofcom, found that seven out of ten Premier League footballers face abuse on Twitter. Over a five-month period during the 2021-22 football season, the tool – which is powered by a machine learning model – detected almost 60,000 abusive tweets. The report’s authors call for social media platforms to step up their efforts to tackle online abuse, and for supporters to flag any abusive content they encounter. The report received widespread media attention in outlets including BBC Sport and The Guardian, and its launch was accompanied by a panel discussion featuring Gary Lineker, Manchester United player Aoife Mannion and Chair of Kick it Out, Sanjay Bhandari.

The team is now adapting its Observatory for other groups in the public eye, including MPs, journalists and female footballers, and it plans to expand the tool to other social media platforms and forms of online harms, such as misinformation and extremism. By engaging with decision makers in Ofcom and UK government, the researchers aim to inform future policy around online harms and help make the internet a safer place for all.

Read the report: Tracking abuse on Twitter against football players in the 2021-22 Premier League season

“The Online Harms Observatory has alerted us to the vast levels of social media abuse experienced by Premier League footballers. Tools such as this are important for the government’s work around online safety because they provide data on the extent and types of harm that people suffer online.”

Daisy Aitken
Security and Online Harms Research Lead, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, UK government