ENVISION|24

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Approaches to Studying Conceptual Relationships in Online Extremism

- Goal: Detecting and disrupting threats

- Problem: Explore the tactics ideological groups use to recruit members, mobilize around identities, issues, and violence, and increase commitment to extremism

- What methods can we use to reveal the effects of online extremist rhetoric?

  o Numerous methods exist, but each has benefits and drawbacks

- Observational:
  - Example: Analysis of trace data
  - Benefits: Observation of actual behavior by sample of interest
  - Drawbacks: Association, not cause and effect
- Interviews/Case Studies:
  - Example: Interviews of group members
  - Benefits: Deep contextual understanding by people of interest
  - Drawbacks: Access; Bias; Generalizability
- Experiments:
  - Example: Randomized, controlled experiment
  - Benefits: Cause and effect
  - Drawbacks: Realism; Access; Human Subjects Protections

- **Mixed-Methods**
  - Example: Combining observational data collection with experiments
  - Benefits: Combined strengths; Causal relationships identified from actual behavior
  - Drawbacks: Slow; Diverse skills needed

- Our approach:
  - **Gather and manually label** messages from online platforms for automated analysis (observational)
  - **Text mining and machine learning** to study dynamics of online discourse and identify messaging tactics (observational)
  - **Experiments** to explore the effect of messaging tactics on group supporters and observers

Examples of Key Findings from Mixed-Methods Efforts

- Multivocality of Messaging
  - o Observation: Groups engaged in multivocality by customizing messaging by platform (Website text, Twitter feeds)
  - o Experiment: Customized messages are better recalled and more highly disseminated, either to express agreement or disagreement with the content. However, multivocal messages and the sending group were perceived as less credible.

- Moral Disengagement in Messaging
  - o Observation: Violent environmental groups engage in widespread moral disengagement during messaging (public wiki for reporting "direct actions")
  - o Experiment: Use of moral disengagement and counter-messaging calling out moral disengagement promote polarization.