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Messaging Matters: How Extremists Influence Followers Online

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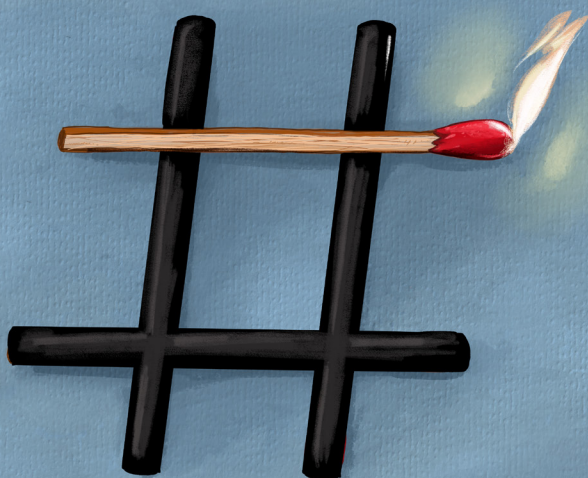
PROJECT OVERVIEW

Extremist groups increasingly use online platforms and messaging to influence followers. This influence can take a variety of forms, including:

- Recruiting and engaging members
- Highlighting social identities
- Increasing communication about extremist issues
- Deepening commitment to extremism
- Inciting violent action

NCITE researchers at the University of Oklahoma are studying the rhetoric and messaging strategies used by extremist ideological groups, both violent and nonviolent. Based on a February 2024 Government Accountability Office recommendation on countering violent extremism that encourages greater information sharing between the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Intelligence and Analysis (DHS I&A) and practitioners, this project will inform policymakers about potential intervention points when conditions may support mobilization to violence on social media and gaming-adjacent platforms. The researchers' rigorous methodology combines an analysis of archived messages from extremist groups with new experimental studies to understand the impact of those messaging strategies.

Language _leading up_ to violent events is similar between violent and non-violent groups, but language _following_ violent events differs significantly.

Generally, there are no significant differences between the top 10 grievances (e.g., relationships, murder, violence) and the top 10 emotions, cognitive appeals, and motives (e.g. negative tone, positive tone, power) which violent vs. non-violent groups mention the most in their messaging. Especially before the violent event the research team studied, the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, the use of these messaging tactics was similar. However, following Jan. 6 and the subsequent presidential inauguration on Jan. 21, the researchers noticed large differences between these groups. As shown in the graph below, following these events, violent groups tended to have more of a negative tone compared to non-violent groups.
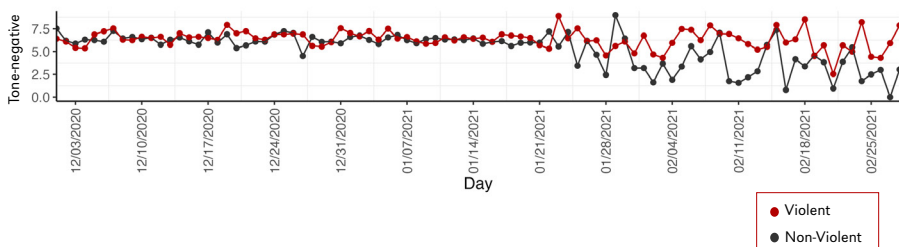
These data show that pinpointing details about violent events prior to an event may be difficult based on rhetoric, but **interventions and counter-messaging may be especially important following an event**. It is also important to note that a small number of ideological groups are involved in violent activities.

COUNTER-MESSAGING

Highlighting misinformation and providing verified facts helps decrease engagement with misleading material.

Misinformation significantly decreases trust in a message, but **only if people recognize it as such.** Exposure to a social media feed that includes messages of known misinformation can decrease perceptions of accuracy, which in turn leads to less sharing, liking, or retweeting. But users must **recognize the message to be misinformation** for this to be true. When people do not identify the content as misinformation, it can lead to more engagement with the material.

People are also influenced by **counter-messaging.** When people viewed misinformation without counter-messaging, they were more likely to share it.

These observations present two important implications for social media and information sharing online:

1) When misinformation is present online, helping others to identify it may undermine message sharing, and **2) counter-messaging and providing verified facts in the face of misinformation may limit its potential.**

TYPES OF MESSAGING

Violent and non-violent groups use different types of messaging. Trends in activity on public microblogs, such as X, formerly known as Twitter, contain clues about messaging that violent and non-violent groups use. Many groups increase messaging on these platforms around the time of contentious events (e.g., presidential elections), which can contribute to more rapid spread of extremist ideologies. Although the differences between violent and non-violent group messaging are small, religious rhetoric tends to increase in advance of violent events. This trend was observed prior to multiple jihadi attacks, as well as before the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

	VIOLENT IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS	NONVIOLENT IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS
Use language that...	Is less positive and *more* vague	Is more positive and *less* vague
Foster a shared sense of identity through...	Fewer expressions of trust	More expressions of trust

Both right-leaning and left-leaning groups use social categorization in their messaging, but right-leaning groups tend to use more out-grouping language (e.g., "they") than left-leaning groups. Additionally, messaging from groups' official accounts use more tentative language than leaders or prominent members of the group.

MESSAGING MATTERS

- **Exposure to a social media feed about an ideological topic can change how strongly people feel about it.** Those who post frequently will likely exert more influence than those who post less regularly.

- **Social media feeds full of tweets about inherent social identities, such as race, tend to stir up more negative emotions in followers than feeds that talk about chosen social identities like political affiliation.** Those negative emotions can help people remember specific messages and increase the likelihood that they share, like, or retweet them.

- **But when social media feeds talk about both types of social identities – inherent and chosen – messages appear to lose their effect.** The tweets become harder to remember, and people are less likely to share them. This observation may be an important step toward mitigating extreme online rhetoric. When a group invokes one social identity, reminding or invoking other social identities may blunt the message's effect.

- **How people perceive and share extremist content is impacted by 1) consistency of the message and 2) others' engagement with the content.** People are better able to remember specific tweets or messages when they are exposed to a social media feed with a variety of topics (e.g., immigration, climate change, religion). However, people perceive a group as more credible, and are more inclined to share its content, when the group's social media feed focuses on only one topic and has high levels of engagement such as retweets and likes.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This report was updated in August 2024 from an ealier version. For more information about the project, visit the project page at ncite.unomaha.edu.

ABOUT NCITE

The National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE) is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Center of Excellence (COE) for research on countering terrorism and targeted violence. Based at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), the Center was established under a 10-year cooperative agreement grant from the DHS Science and Technology Directorate's (S&T) Office of University Programs (OUP) in 2020.