Abstracts of the 2021 Technology, Mind, & Society Conference

The Dark Side of the Lightnet: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Unmoderated Social Media Content
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The “Lightnet,” in contrast to the notorious “Dark Web,” refers to the indexable section of the World Wide Web readily accessible to the average internet user, where public social media platforms are hosted. Despite the relative lack of anonymity within the “Lightnet,” social media platforms—particularly those without content moderation—have become increasingly associated with specific instances of violence driven by extremist ideologies, from widespread mass shootings to the recent attack on the United States Capitol. Given the novelty of this phenomenon, virtually no psychological research has been conducted regarding the relationship between violent extremism and the content within unmoderated social media platforms. In an attempt to clarify the role of social media in the perpetration of violent extremism, as well as the development of extremist beliefs, the researchers utilize Qualitative Content Analysis to examine trends in content from current and previous unmoderated social media platforms, including Parler, 4chan, and 8chan. Analysis of this content involves text-mining, the development of a hierarchical system of thematic codes, and in-depth qualitative analysis of randomly selected, de-identified posts or threads. Given the qualitative nature of this analysis, results are primarily descriptive, highlighting common themes across these platforms and correlations between thematic trends and specific user characteristics (i.e., average length of posts, inclusion of a profile biography). The researchers discuss the results of this analysis in relation to existing literature regarding violent extremism, as well as a preliminary theoretical framework from which to develop future investigations.