Class 13: Individuals in the far right
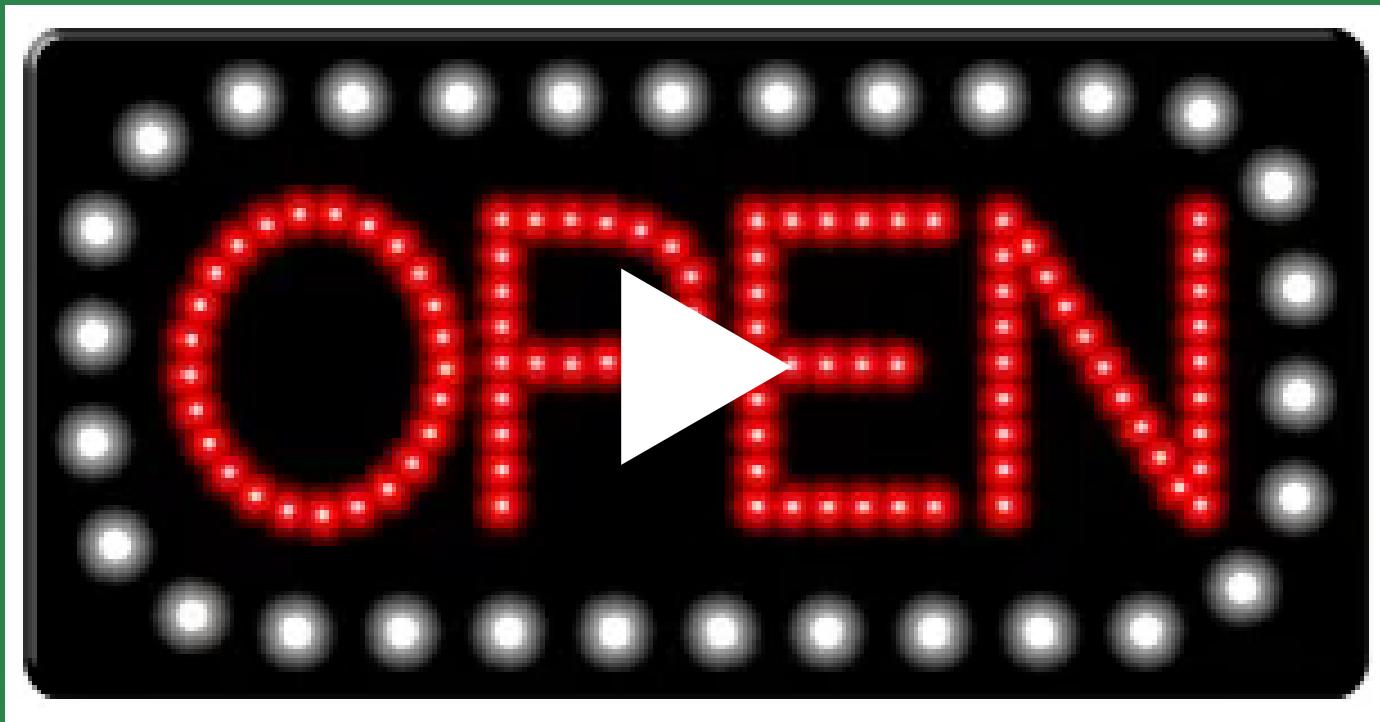
Online

Dr. Michael C. Zeller

Agenda for the day

- Opening notes
- The far right online
- Regulating the far right online
- Poll: regulating the far right online
- Dealing with the far right online: effects, legitimacy
- Any questions, concerns, feedback for this class?

Opening notes

Presentation groups

Date	Presenters	Method
3 July:	Alexander V., Luis G., Oscar O., Mia C.	descriptive inference
10 July:	Lina S., Stephen W., Philomena B., Aarón Z.	ethnography
17 July:	Corinna Z., Eva M., and Rostislav N.	process tracing
24 July:	Sebastian K., Thomas R., Emilia Z., Florian P.	quant. text analysis

The far right online

- brief history
- forms of contemporary far right online (Zhang and Davis 2022)
  - cryptic codes
  - spotlight on financing
- networking transnationally (Heft et al. 2021)
- multi-platform strategies (Mitts 2025)

Brief history (cf. Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair 2019)

- **Early days** (1980s): telephone information lines; online bulletin board systems

- **1990s**: Stormfront, organisational websites

- **2000s**: rise of social media, renaissance of forums (chans, reddit, imageboards) (Crawford, Keen, and Suarez-Tangil 2020)

- **2010s**: diversification (video/audio content, news/reporting, editorial accounts, interpersonal connections/networking, 'going on offence'/trolling)

- **2020s**: sophistication (dark web, crypto, backing up social i activity to alternative platforms (*nimbleness*)) (ISD and Financial Action Task Force 2021; Blazakis 2022)

Far-right activism forms online

- we have discussed far-right activity forms *offline*, but...

What do far-right actors (individuals or even groups/organisations) use the internet for? Is there anything distinctive compared to other types of actors?

far right use of online tools (Zhang and Davis 2022)

- distribute information

    - most extreme cases: spreading '*attacker manifestos*'

        - a focal point for platforms and states in recent years

- produce subculture (content containing frames, narratives, and that generates collective identity)

- fundraise

- lobby policy-makers

- transnational organisation and mobilisation

    - examples: '#FreeTommy', anti-Istanbul Convention, EU elections

    - other examples? what do those examples tell us?

Cryptic codes

- Far-right actors online often use 'wolf-in-sheep's-clothes strategy' (Zhang and Davis 2022): *camouflage extremist ideas with in-jokes and coded language*

	Strong FR connection	Weak FR connection
Slightly cryptic	e.g., 'white power', Reichsadler	e.g., Celtic crosses, meander patterns
Highly cryptic	e.g., '14 words', Nordadler symbols, Kühnengruß	e.g., '100%', runic symbols

- Other examples? ('Let's go Brandon!', the 'okay' hand symbol)

Spotlight on far-right financing online

Legality and/or Terms of Service Compliance

Legal and/or Non-Violation of Terms	Illegal and/or Violation of Terms

Spotlight on far-right financing online

Legality and/or Terms of Service Compliance

Legal and/or Non-Violation of Terms	Illegal and/or Violation of Terms
1. Donations/self-funding	

Spotlight on far-right financing online

Legality and/or Terms of Service Compliance

Legal and/or Non-Violation of Terms	Illegal and/or Violation of Terms
1. Donations/self-funding	
2a. Sale of goods (merchandise, music, real estate, etc)	

Spotlight on far-right financing online

Legality and/or Terms of Service Compliance

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2b. Sale of services (memberships, events, etc)	

Spotlight on far-right financing online

Legality and/or Terms of Service Compliance

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1. Donations/self-funding	
2a. Sale of goods (merchandise, music, real estate, etc)	
2b. Sale of services (memberships, events, etc)	
3. Criminal activities	

1. Donations/self-funding (e.g., Blazakis 2022; Bog... ?

- use of *mainstream platforms* (PayPal, Patreon, Kickstarter, Monero, and GoFundMe)
  - but counter-mobilisation has pressured these platforms (Kienzl 2019; Rietschel 2019)
    - part of widespread strategy: 'bankrupt' the far right (Ortiz 2022) (e.g., against 2017 Charlottesville, U.S. rally)
  - 'hacking' of some platforms (GiveSendGo) (Wilson 2021)
- *alternative funding platforms* used (Hatreon, Goyfundme): less reach, but less risk of lock-out
- *crypto-currencies*: difficult to trace, large transfers (Sick and Jost 2023; Hussain 2021)—but still outside mainstream

- far-righ… **…ness**

- fascist f…
  - *expli…* …ter-
    mobi…
  - co-op…

- real est… resourc…
  - NPD …ill…

- *key que…* open
  - main…
  - webs…

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2b. Sale of services (memberships, events, etc)
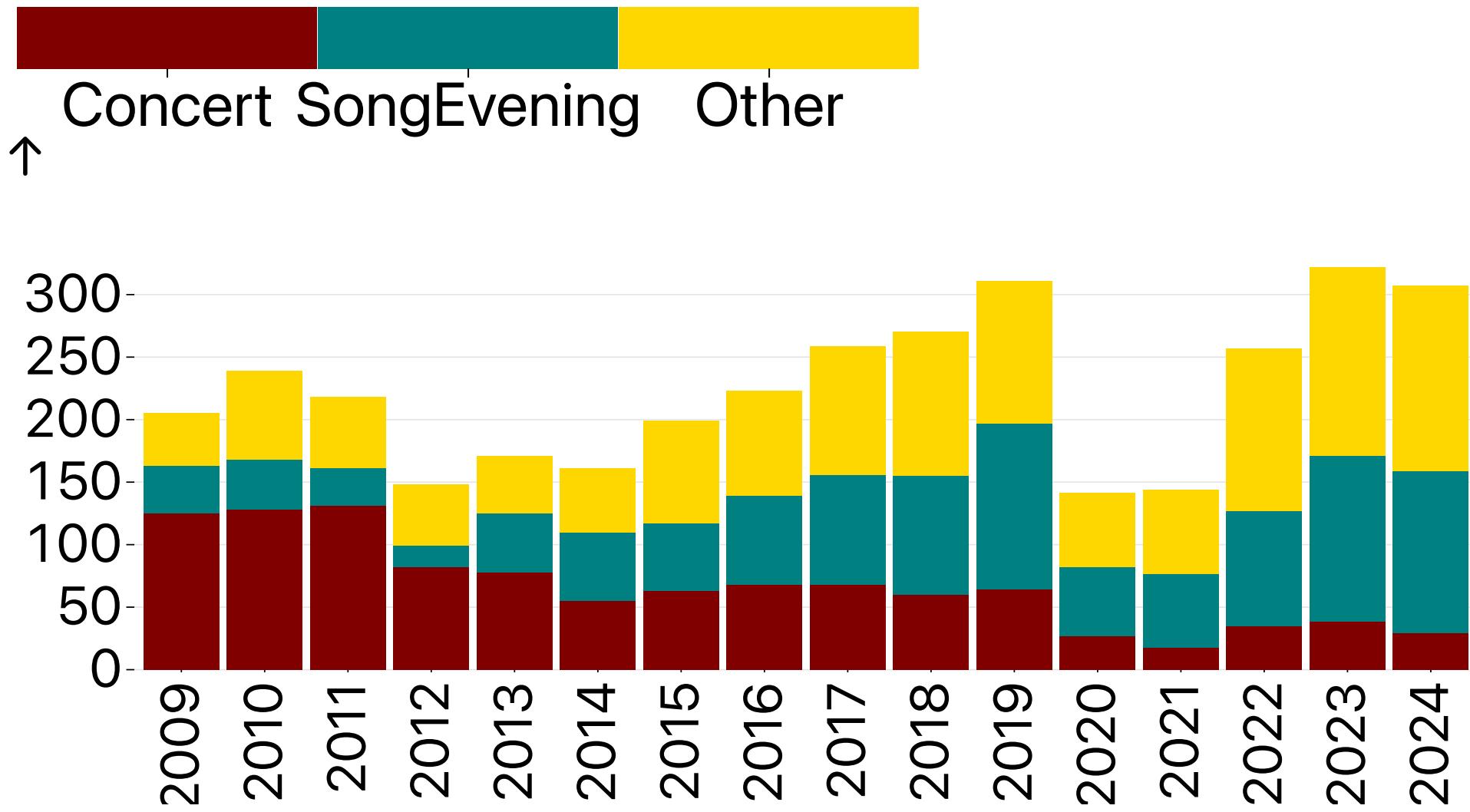
- like music sales, concerts are a major source of financing (Dych 2016; Colborne 2022)
  - also for building collective identity, solidarity, networking, etc.
- fight events (MMA, boxing, etc.) have spread and become profitable
  - e.g., *Kampf der Nibelungen* (started 2013, DE bans starting in 2019, new *replacement events*)
- some FR groups have membership fees

Bundesministerium des Innern (2024):

right-wing extremist music events

Event	2023	2024
Concert	39	29
'Song evening'	132	130
Other	40	151
Total	322	307

Far-right music events (Germany, Verfassungschutz

☑ Concert ☑ SongEvening ☑ Other

3. Criminal activities

- production and/or sale of drugs (Ibsen et al. 2020)

- cyber-crime

  - hacking computer networks

  - sale or distribution of violence-enabling tools

 - more accessible (for now?) through manipulation of generative AI tools (e.g., *Telegraph* 2024)
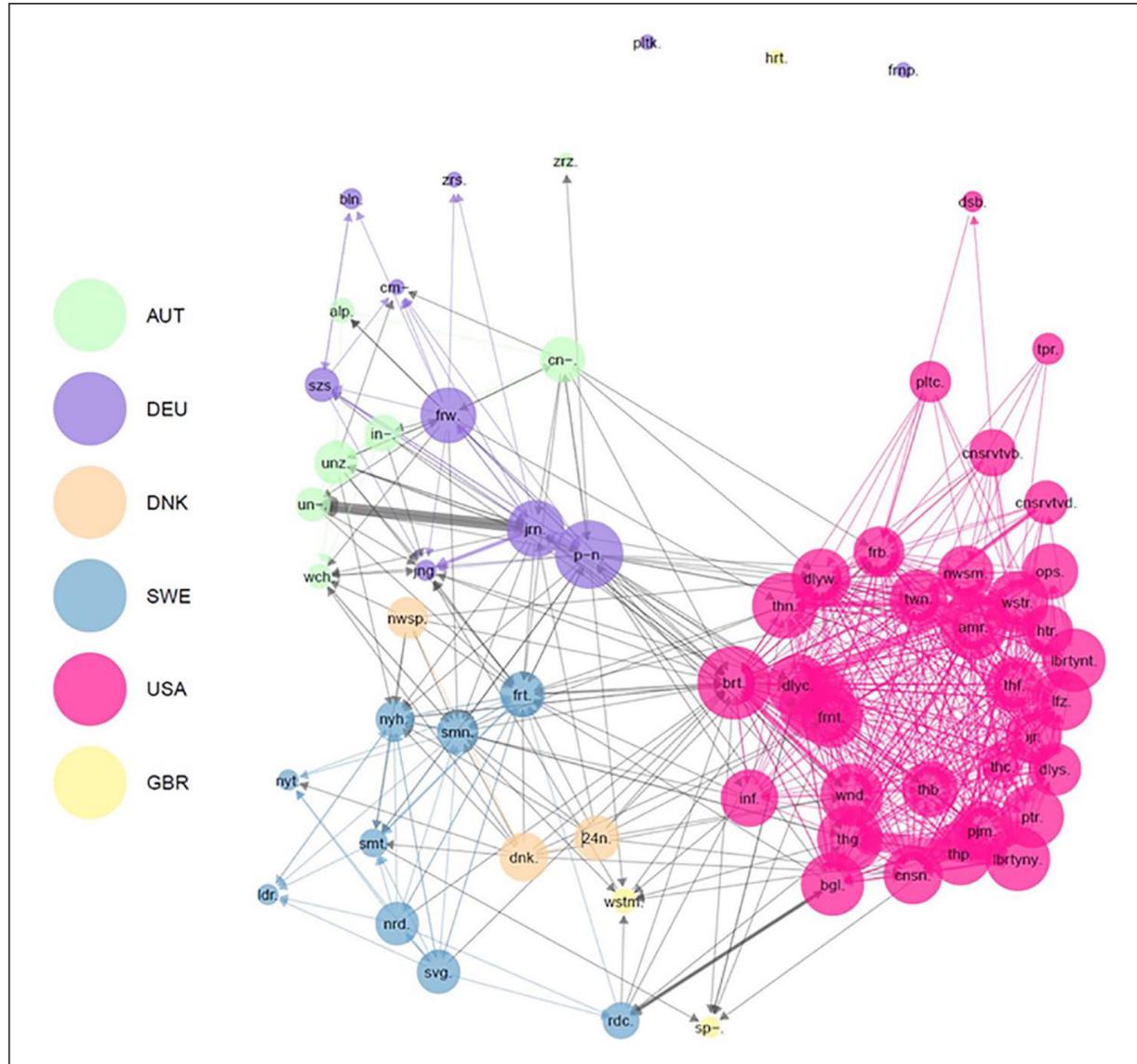
Networking transnationally (Heft et al. 2021)

> To what extent do [alternative right-wing online news sites (RNS)] in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Sweden, and Denmark form national and transnational right-wing news ecologies through hyperlinking?

findings:

- countries differ significantly the scope of their networking activities toward other RNS

- domestic links predominate in United States, Sweden, and Germany

- In Denmark, transnational links are predominant

- balanced distribution in Austria

Networking transnationally (Heft et al. 2021)

Multi-platform strategies (Mitts 2025)

militant and hate organizations' online success centers on their ability to operate across many platforms in parallel

- content moderation "organized practice of screening user-generated content (UGC) posted to Internet sites, social media, and other online outlets, in order to determine the appropriateness of the content for a given site, locality, or jurisdiction."

Regulating the far right online
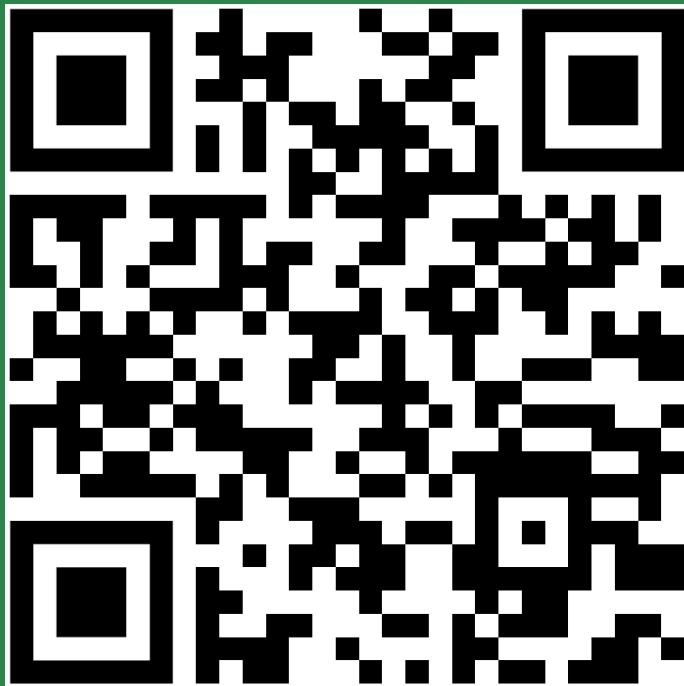
- poll
- regulation challenges (Mitts 2025)

- regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)

  - extant regulations

- 'dangerous actors' on Meta (Biddle 2021)

  - example: CasaPound and Facebook (e.g., Golia and Behring 2020)

Poll: regulating the far right onlin LMU

Take the survey at
https://forms.gle/6r8coBVy5v9C7x7t8

- Who should define what is (right-wing) extremist content?

- Who should shape policy responding to (right-wing) extremist content?

- What should predominant approach be?

- Is deplatforming effective for dealing with online extremism?

- Should criminal penalties exist for spreading disinformation?

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- *assumption*: stronger action by platform companies will decrease their ability to exploit the internet

  - this assumption is plausible in isolated platform perspective—less so in multi-platform perspective

  - platforms largely moderate content in isolation, but extremist actors coordinate activity across multiple platforms

- adaptation mechanisms:

  - platform migration: move to alternative platforms

  - messaging: moderate discourse on regulated platforms

  - mobilisation: problematise platforms' content moderation policies/practices

Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)

- contest

- collaborate

- convince

Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)

- collaborate

- convince

- # contest

- legally binding, enforceable rules

  - executive orders; legislatures pass laws (e.g., data protection, competition regulation, consumer safety; cybersecurity)

Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)

- contest

- collaborate

- convince

# Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)

- contest

- convince

- collaborate

- non-binding, voluntarily enacted rules designed with government input, occasionally featuring binding procedural constraints
  - may be agreed by a mix of industry, firm, and civil society stakeholders → implemented voluntarily by industry

Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)

- contest

- collaborate

- convince

Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)
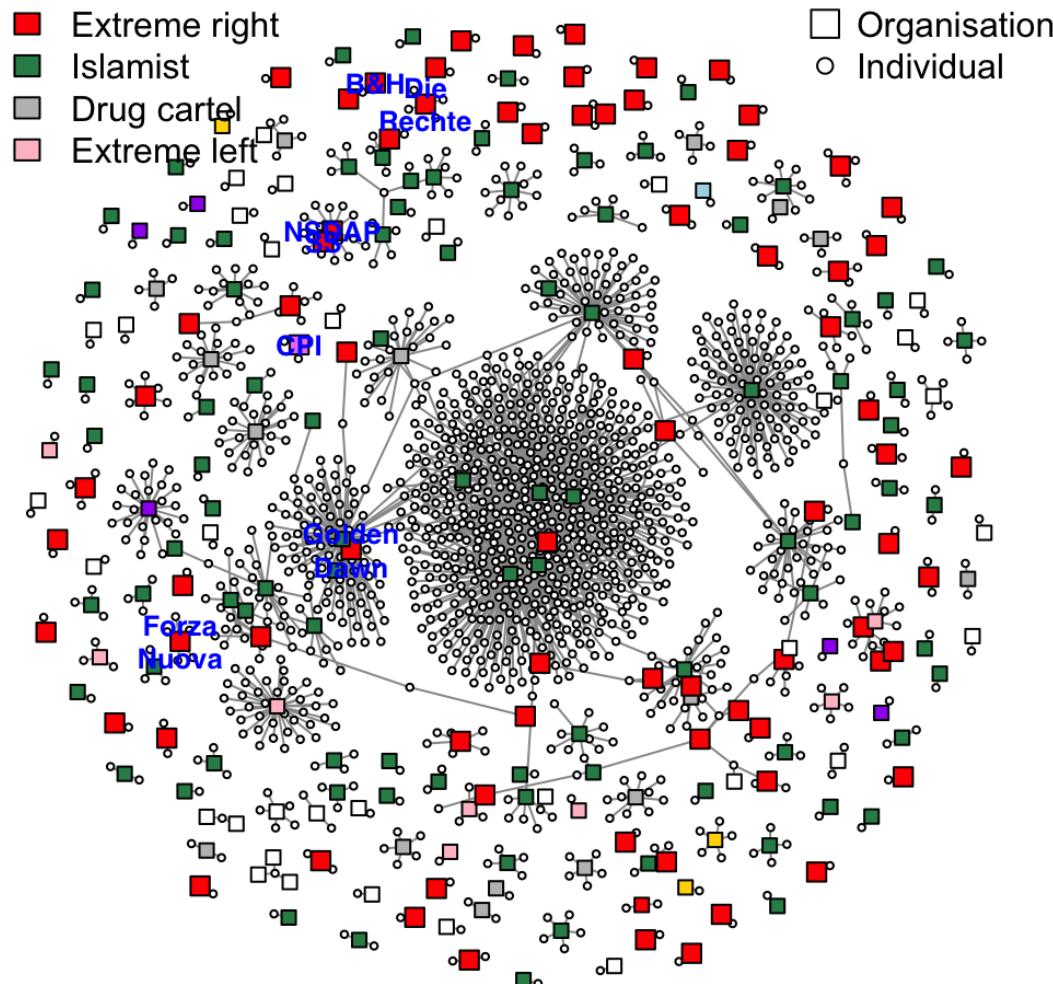
- contest

- collaborate

- convince

Regulation approaches (Gorwa 2024)
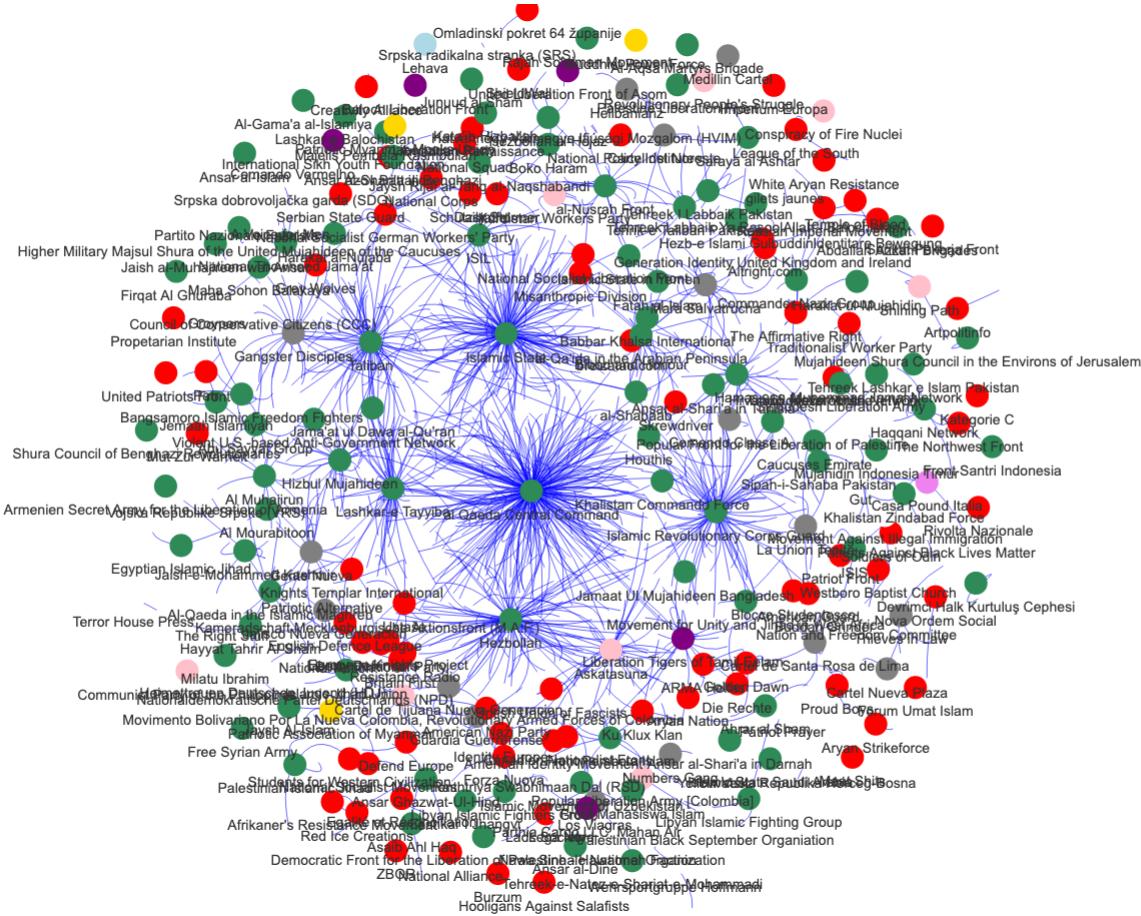
- contest - legally binding, enforceable rules

- collaborate - non-binding, voluntarily enacted rules designed with government input, occasionally featuring binding procedural constraints

- convince - using existing channels to raise grievances rather than striving for new rules

- likelihood of approach success depends on political will (sufficient demand for change) and power to intervene (shaped by state's market power, regulatory capacity, domestic and international context, and norms)

- trend of platform governance hybridization

Major extant regulation, forums, etc. (cf. Gorwa 2024, Conway et al. 2023)

'dangerous actors' on Meta (Biddle 2021)

'dangerous actors' on Meta (Biddle 2021)

**Extreme right**, **Islamist**, **Drug cartel**, **Extreme left**, **Buddhist nationalist**, **Separatist**
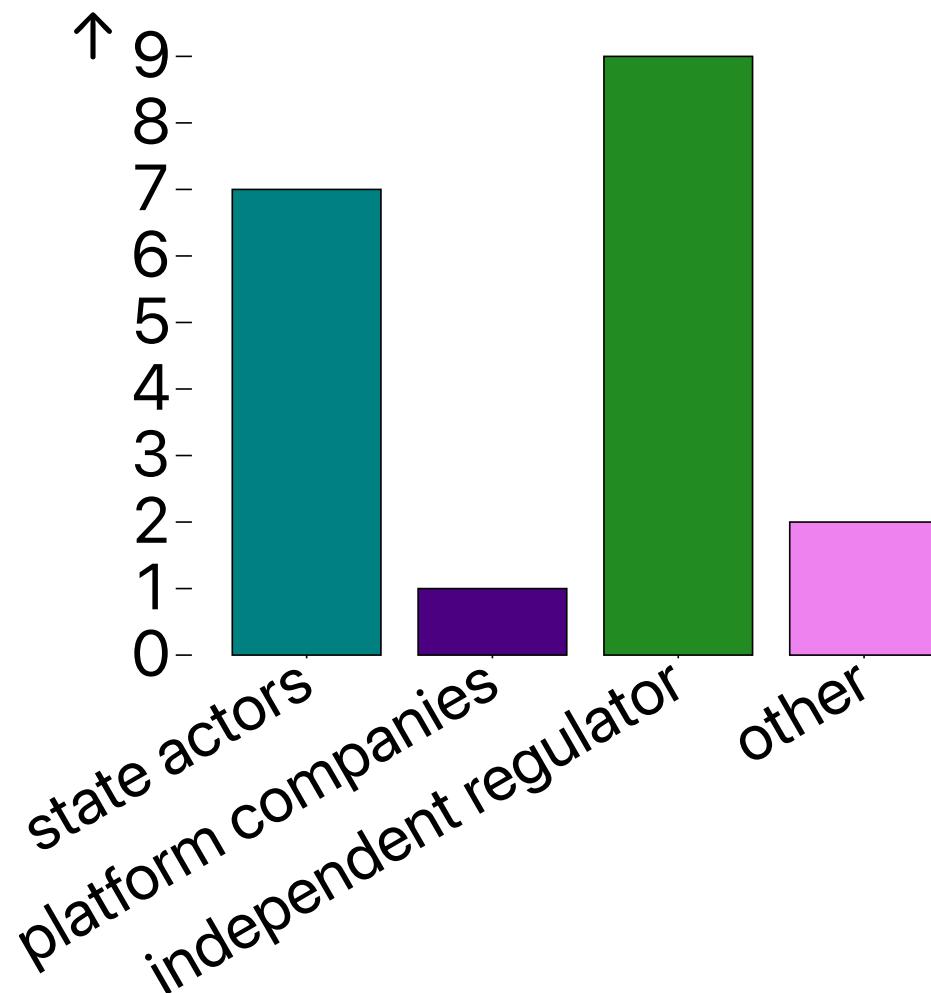
CasaPound v. Facebook (e.g., Golia and Behring 2020
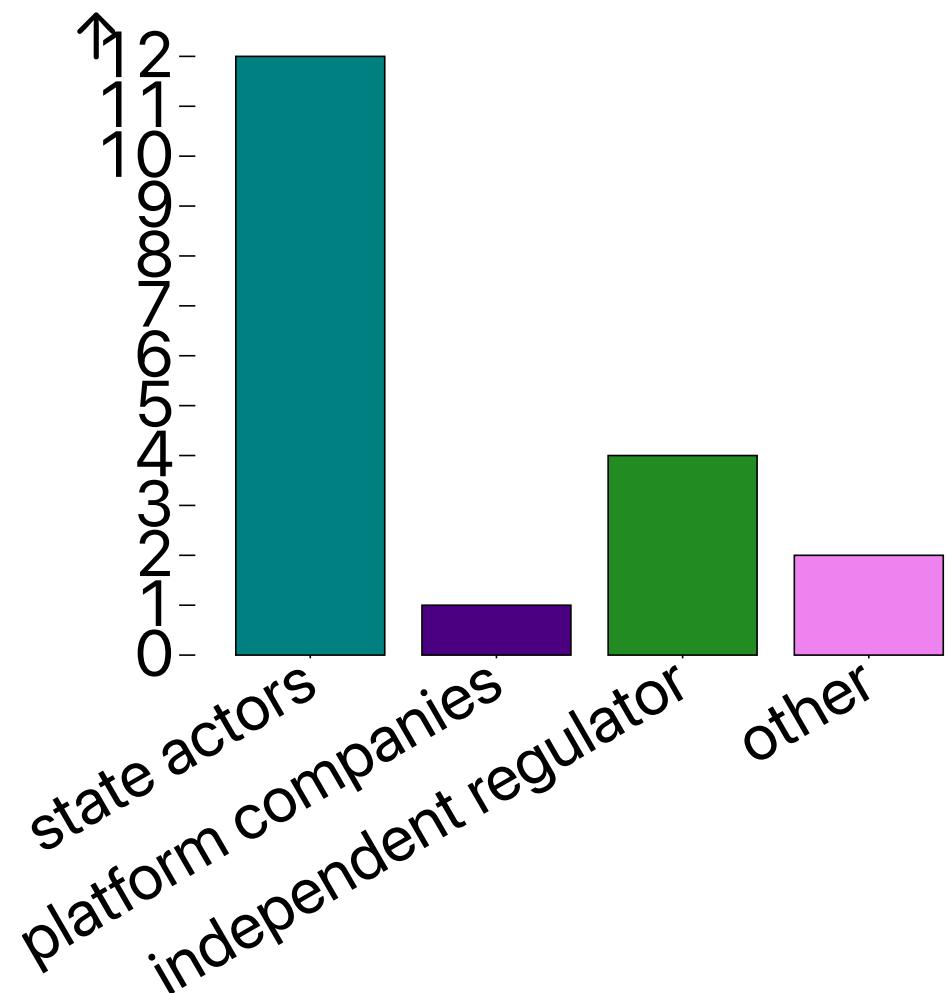
- *what is at stake here? who decides? who ought to?*

define what is impermissible

make *policy* responses

CasaPound v. Facebook (e.g., Golia and Behring 2020

- **Court decision**:

    - 'Facebook holds a special position and its mission aims to uphold freedom of expression'

    - CP page deactivation violated its rights as a political party (under **article 49 of the Constitution**)

    - ordered FB to reactivate page(s) and pay a penalty of 800 EUR for each day of deactivation

- **Facebook** appealed (unsuccessfully), saying it is 'a private company operating for profit protected by art. 41 of the Constitution', that:
- Zuckerberg initially referred to Facebook as a 'utility'…

the order had erroneously attributed a special nature to the contract between the social network and the user, when it was instead an ordinary contract under civil law. In the absence of any legal basis, according to Facebook, it is not possible to attribute public service obligations to private sector players such as the protection of freedom of association and expression. Likewise, Facebook argued that it is not required to ensure special protection to some users such as organizations engaged in political activities by virtue of their role in the political debate.
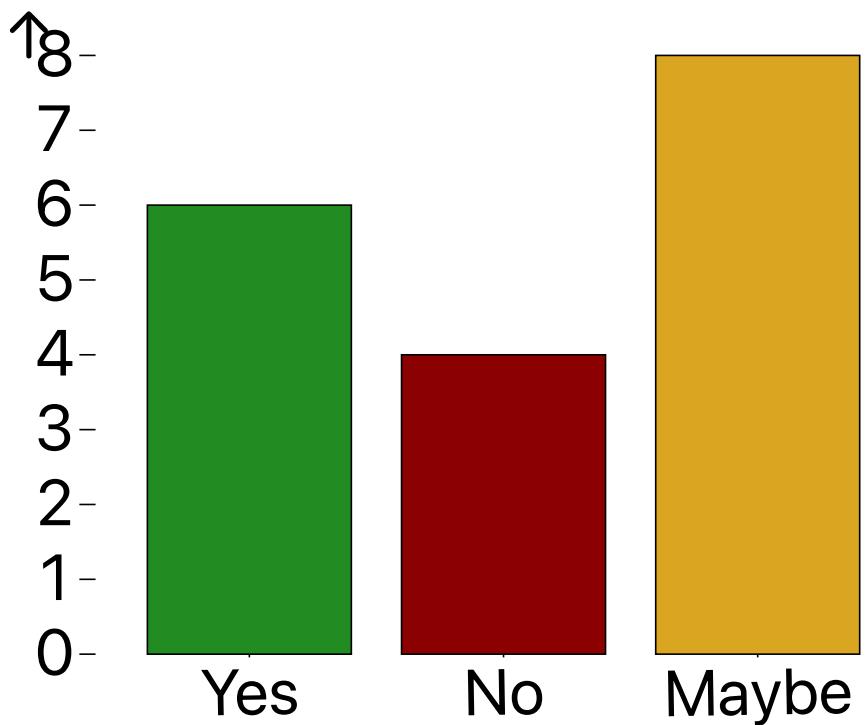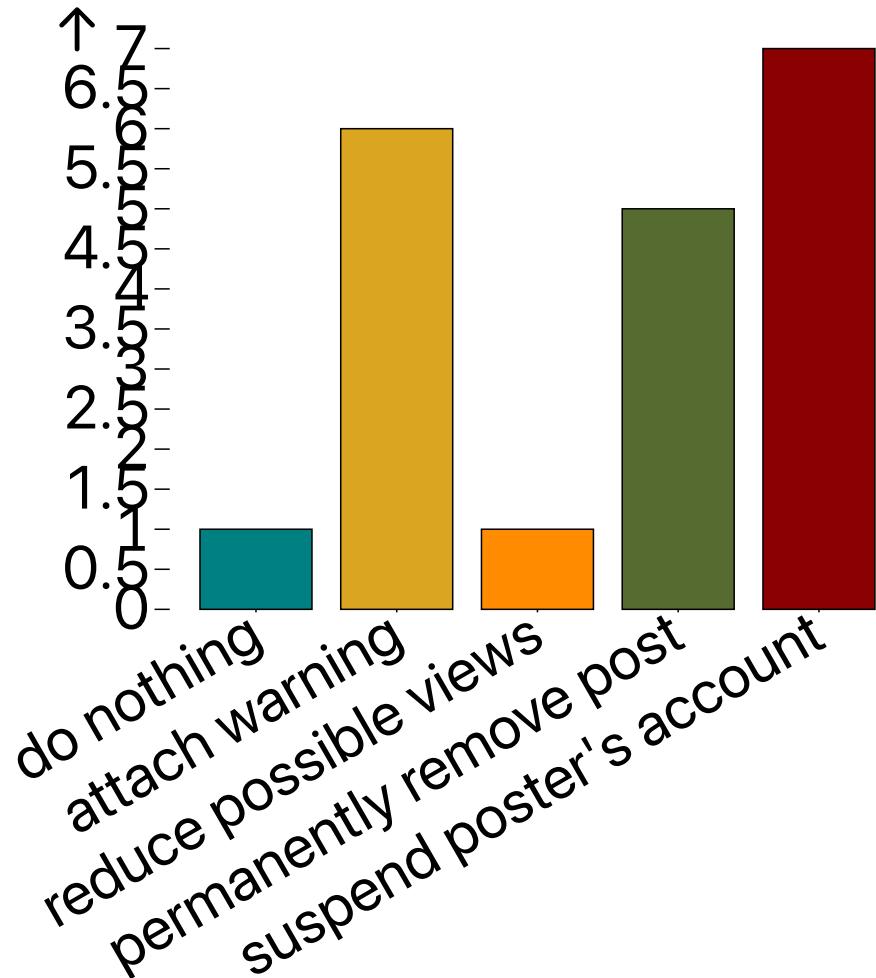
Dealing with the far right online: effects, legitimacy

- deplatforming effects (Ghaffary 2022; Thomas and Wahedi 2023; Chandrasekharan et al. 2017; Rauchfleisch and Kaiser 2024)

  - for more, see Mitts (2025) – it's a brilliant study!

- legitimacy of censorious measures (Pradel et al. 2024)

Predominant approach and deplatforming

should be predominant *approach*   *deplatforming* effective?

Deplatforming effects

- diminishing the scale of influence (Ghaffary 2022)

  - Facebook, Youtube: billions of users

  - Parler, Gettr (e.g.): at most a few million users

  - Telegram: a few hundred million users, little regulation

    - e.g., Proud Boys' use (Bailard et al. 2024)

    - more emphasis on content moderation after CEO's arrest in 2024 ...

- the 'whack-a-mole' problem: extremist social media accounts removed, but reappear on other sites and/or under aliases

Deplatforming effects (Thomas and Wahedi 2023)

- RQ: How does removing the *leadership of online hate organizations* from online platforms change behavior in their target audience?

- cases: six network disruptions (i.e., deplatforming) on Facebook
  - NB: *the researchers are/were Meta employees*

- finding: network disruptions reduced the consumption and production of hateful content

The results suggest that strategies of targeted removals, such as leadership removal and network degradation efforts, can reduce the ability of hate organizations to successfully operate online.

Deplatforming effects (Chandrasekharan et al. 2017
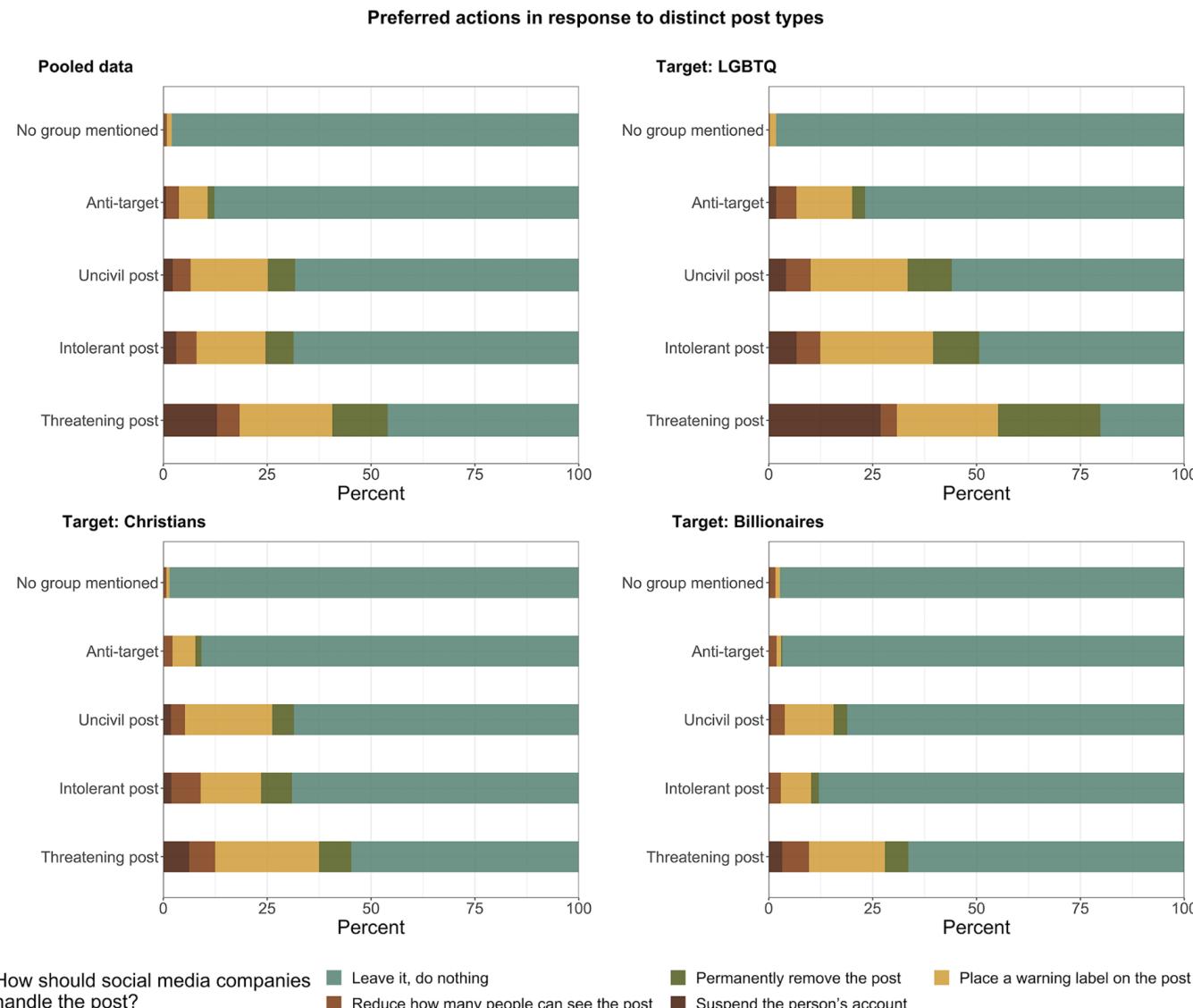
- 10 June 2015, Reddit banned several subreddits, includi r/fatpeoplehate and r/CoonTown

- *RQ1*: What effect did Reddit's ban have on the contributors to banned subreddits?

- *RQ2*: What effect did the ban have on subreddits that saw an influx of banned subreddit users?

- findings:

  - many users from banned subreddits became inactive

    - led to a drop in Reddit users (some migrated to other platforms)… *what's the significance of this finding*?

  - volume of *active* users' posting mostly unchanged

  - a dramatic decrease in hate speech usage by the treatment users post-ban

Content moderation, deplatforming legitimacy (Prac a 2024)
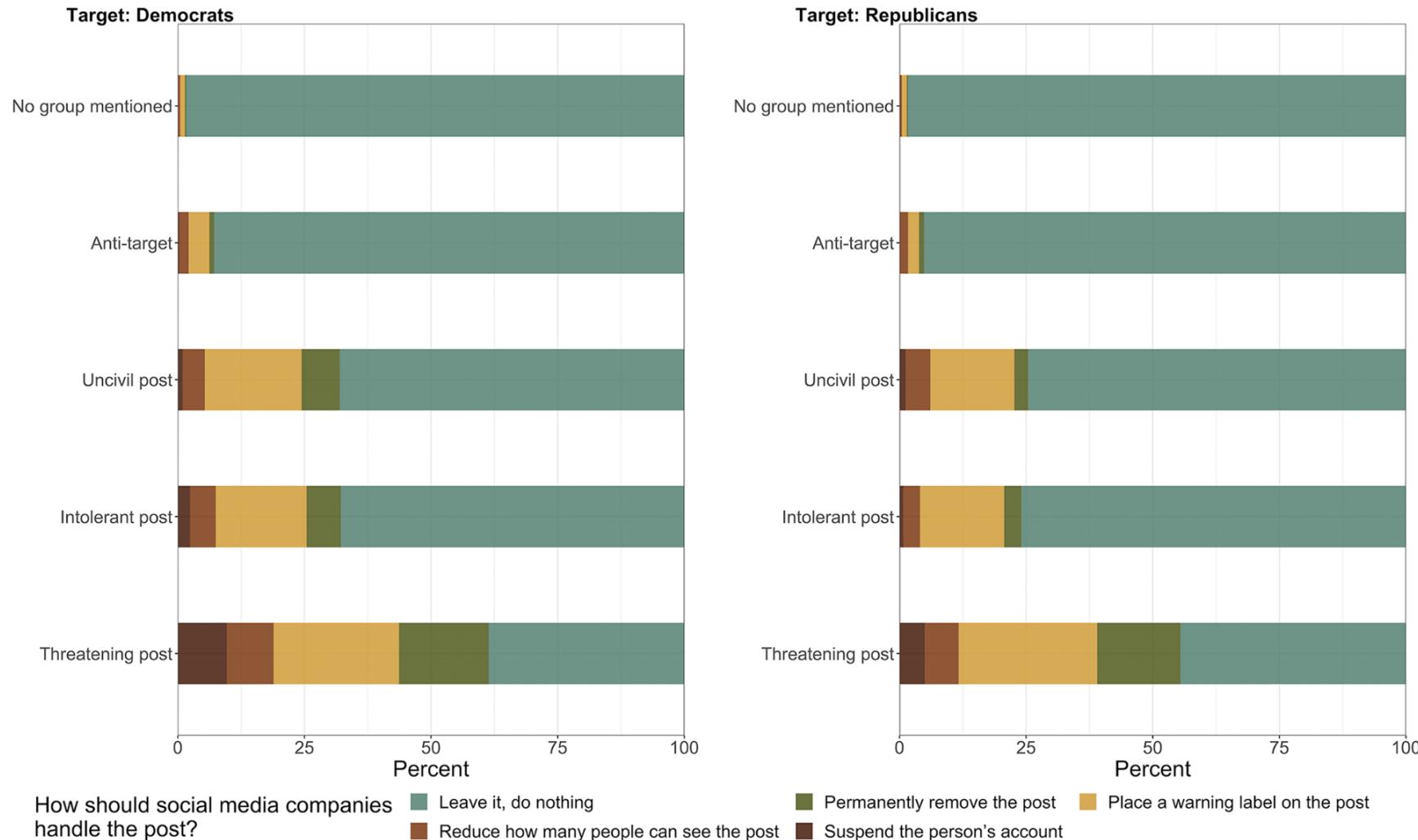
- key concept: *Toxic speech* as consisting of…

  a. incivility,

  b. intolerance, and

  c. violent threats

- experimental design: randomly exposed people (in U.S.) to *toxic speech* social media posts → effect on users' content moderation preferences

Preferred actions in response to distinct post types

Pooled data — Target: LGBTQ — Target: Christians — Target: Billionaires

Post types (y-axis): No group mentioned, Anti-target, Uncivil post, Intolerant post, Threatening post

Percent (x-axis): 0, 25, 50, 75, 100

How should social media companies handle the post?
- Leave it, do nothing
- Reduce how many people can see the post
- Permanently remove the post
- Suspend the person's account
- Place a warning label on the post

Moderation, deplatforming legitimacy (Pradel et al. 2

Preferred actions in response to distinct post types

Any questions, concerns, feedback for this class?

Anonymous feedback here:
https://forms.gle/pisUmtmWdE13zMD58

Alternatively, send me an email: m.zeller@lmu.de

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