The Evolution of Hate
Social Dynamics in White Racist Newsgroups[1]

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[Hate crime]…is dynamic and in a state of constant movement and change, rather than static and fixed.

- Benjamin Bowling (1993)

The activities of white racists and racialists[2] have evolved rapidly since the invention of the World Wide Web and Internet newsgroups. In the UK, white racists use mainstream politics newsgroups such as Alt.politics.british and Soc.culture.british to discuss racial superiority and inferiority, inspire violence against people and property, make threats and attract new recruits. In the USA, white racists tend to set up specialist white racialist newsgroups such as Alt.politics.nationalism.white, alt.revisionism and alt.flameniggers. On-line anti-Nazi/fascist activists have achieved successes in disrupting race hate postings in some newsgroups, but white racialists have had considerably more success in spreading their messages through Web sites. This provides some useful insights into the social dynamics of white racist and anti-racist activists in Internet newsgroups.

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[1] This paper is part of a wider programme of work undertaken by the Nottingham Centre for the Study and Reduction of Hate Crimes and is a sister paper to: Sutton, M (**Forthcoming July** 2003) Finding the Far Right Online: An exploratory study of white racialist Web sites. In Taylor, P. and Wall, D. (Eds.) Global Deviance in the Information Age. Routledge. London.

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[2] **Note:** In reporting findings from our newsgroup research, in this paper, the term *white racists* is used to describe individuals and groups including neo-Nazis, Aryan racialists, the Far Right, Ku Klux Klan, racist skinheads, various identity church organisations and other racist groups and individuals. The fine distinction between racist and racialist is explained and discussed in the paper. Throughout this paper, we use the terms white racialism and racism interchangeably with race hate, Net is used interchangeably with Internet, and the term *Netwar[s]* is used interchangeably with flame war[s].

Studies of variety and the complexities of offending are useful in helping us understand that 'crime' is not homogenous, and that different types of offending have different causes and consequences that need to be tackled with different methods. In addition to this, knowledge of the impact that crimes have on everyday lives - taken from measurement of the incidence and prevalence of crime - is particularly important. Because of this, we should always be mindful, when focusing on particular types of offending, to seek to examine the reality of the problem. Criminologists must keep the study of crime in the right perspective, or else risk becoming moral panic starters (Cohen 1980). Certainly, in many areas, except perhaps for paedophilia and virus spreading, the sheer volume of on-line anarchy is arguably not as great as some would have us believe (Wall 1998). Yet, in the off-line world, referred to by Pease (2001) as "meatspace", certain types of crime can become heavily concentrated in particular areas - placing enormous burdens upon victims and the criminal justice system (Pease 1998). Research has shown how changes in technology, or the economy, can create markets for stolen goods or increase levels of violent crime - with subsequent crime waves (Field 1990; Sutton 1995,1998; Pease 1998). It is important, therefore, to understand how and why crime and offending behaviour adapts and changes. This will help inform policymakers and practitioners to identify the next crime wave before it strikes and to deploy scarce criminal justice, and other detection and crime reduction, resources (Foresight 2000a; 2000b) in both cyberspace and meatspace.

Dealing with definitions

It is important to explain some of the terms used in this paper because they represent some rather precise Far Right[3] meanings of 'self' and 'us', versus 'them' and 'others'. Although the term racialist and racist are often used interchangeably with fascist and neo-Nazi, many people who define themselves as racialist insist that they are not racists and are not Nazis. The word racialist is used to mean someone who believes in the superiority of one 'race' over another and who voices their views because they are feeling surrounded or outnumbered by representatives of other 'races'. The term racist is used to define someone who simply believes that race is what determines a person's characteristics, so that some races are thought to be superior to others[4]. To emphasise the point, appreciation of such fine distinctions of self definition is necessary if we are to understand more about the way that racialist messages are conveyed in cyberspace, and how the dynamics of racist communication and interaction is likely to evolve and change as a result of the Communications Revolution. To this end, Becker et al (2000) point out: "If we, as a society, are to better understand extremism, then we must seriously review and comprehend the views of extremists, which in turn will lead to a better understanding where much of the hate speech on the internet comes from." As well as understanding where extremist views come from, we also need to understand more about the ways that these views are disseminated in different communities and the impact that that they have on those communities. This is one of the main aims of the research reported in this paper.

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[3] In this paper, the term Far Right includes anyone with extreme racist or racialist views.
[4] Adapted from Hutchinson Encyclopaedia 2000 see:
http://www.tiscali.co.uk/reference/dictionaries/english/data/d0082677.html

In our study of newsgroup dynamics, the term 'racist' is used to describe a broad spectrum of race hate belief systems and groups. We use the term racist in the newsgroup research to include white-separatists, white-racists, white racialists, anti-Semites, those who are fiercely opposed to multiculturalism - or who use known offensive terms to describe people from minority ethnic backgrounds[5]. Those referred to in this way *may* call themselves either 'racist' or 'racialist' and have clearly indicated in their messages that they are happy to be placed under one of these other descriptions. In describing racist members of newsgroups we use the broader term *racists,* as opposed to the term *white racialist*, because members of newsgroups tend to be more disparate and so do not have the same degree of group definition characterised by the many white racialists publishing on Web sites (see Sutton 2003) who prefer to be defined as racialists.

The Main Issue

The Internet, as an easy and virtually instant, cheap networking and publishing medium, provides a new dimension for the promoters of hate crime. Although Far Right Web sites generally aim to further the interests of white racialists at the expense of minority groups, on rare occasions some of their Web sites are used in an attempt to inflame violence in particular places. For example, following riots in England in 2001, involving activists from far-right groups, the mass media reported stories of how Combat 18 activists circulated the names and addresses of prominent local anti-racist figures on their Web site, together with directions for making and storing petrol bombs (Harris, 2001). More usually, however, such Web sites provide links to other sites, or access to books and manuals on techniques of terrorism - including bomb making. For example, the Brick lane Bomber David Copeland was a member of the British National Party (BNP) who learned from the Internet how to make and use pipe bombs and he went on to target gays and lesbians in the Soho district of London.

The Net has Web sites for the BNP, White Aryan Resistance, Combat 18, National Alliance, Stormfront, Identity Church Movement, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the (US based) militia movement - to name just a few. Clearly, this powerful international communications medium is facilitating neo-Nazi networks as well as the sharing of ideas and ideologies (Back, et al 1998). While the Net appears to be used more for this purpose than as a means of command and control (Whine, M. 2000), there are some reported cases revealing that it has also been used to publish the names addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses of intended targets.

Hate speech, hate crime and white racism

There is no universally accepted definition of hate crime (Hamm 1994). The term *hate crime* was first used in the USA by politicians and journalists to describe individual crimes that may be perpetrated against one individual, or a group of individuals, on the basis of who they are rather than what they have done (Levin and McDevitt 2002). *Hate speech* is a form of hate crime, and, *speech* can take the form of written or

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[5] It was decided to exclude militia groups from this study, to avoid ambiguity - although some writers are of the opinion that militia groups, although not overtly racist are in fact racist due to their adherence to particular conspiracy theories and the so called New World Order (Barkun 1998).

spoken words[6]. Becker et al (2000) define hate speech as: "…speech that inflicts emotional damage and contains inflammatory comments meant to arouse other individuals to cause severe social dislocation and damage." To provide a more detailed definition, Bjoro and Witte's (1993) description of what constitutes racial violence is also equally useful in describing the essential essence of both the criminal and non-criminal hate speech used by white racialists on the Internet:

> "In general, perpetrators of racist violence [speech[7]] define their victims as 'them' who are distinguished from 'us' on the basis of skin colour, religion, cultural, ethnic or national origin. Often the presence of 'them' is experienced and portrayed as a threat to 'our' culture, life style, welfare, 'race', etc. 'They' should be excluded from various aspects of life, to varying degrees: from social services, jobs, housing, to living at all in the same country. "

Where the criminal law has been broken in meatspace, then violent racialised hate crime is racially motivated offending falling within the definition of racially aggravated offences under Section 28 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (see Home Office 2002). Tore Bjorgo and Rob Witte (Bjorgo and Witte 1993) provide a simple three-fold typology of racist violence that can be used to determine the level of harm caused by hate crimes on the streets: *terrorist attacks* (bombings, arson, shootings*); street violence* (premeditated or spontaneous) and *vandalism/threats/verbal abuse/gestures*. This last category is most likely to be characterised by repeat victimisation, and as such should be viewed as an ongoing process of victimisation having a serious cumulative impact upon victims (Bowling 1990).

Very often, the main motivation for hate crimes is to inform individual victims and, by association, every member of their group that their presence will not be tolerated. Levin and McDevitt (2002) provide a useful *motivation typology* of 4 main types of hate crime that take place on the streets: *Thrill*; *Defence*; *Retaliatory* and *Mission*. *Thrill* hate crimes are described as "recreational" offences where attacks against victims, or their property, are motivated by a desire to achieve peer status and have fun at the expense of clearly definable "others". *Defence* crimes are committed as a means to warn "others" that they should stay away from a certain neighbourhood or place, job or not date "our women". *Retaliatory* crimes are committed for revenge and can involve escalation to larger scale group conflict. Such crimes usually follow-on from incidents between those defined by racialists as "us" and those defined as "others" - in an attempt to exact what might be termed racialised-revenge and to keep the "others" in their place. *Mission* crimes are most usually committed by a number of offenders acting together as an organised hate group, making it their mission in life to attack certain targets.

In seeking to understand how it is that the Far Right have been able to operate at all since the end of the Second World War, in countries that fought against, were taken over by, or became the Axis Powers of Nazi Germany and Italy, many writers stress the decline of heavy manufacturing in the West - with the subsequent disenfranchisement of men within traditional working class white communities. This

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[6] In the UK, hate speech can be criminal if it falls within the definition of inciting racial hatred. However, the law is quite complex in this area and there are several defences available. For a comprehensive explanation of the law covering racially inflammatory material on the Internet see Home Office (2002).
[7] Our insertion.

explanation has a crucial part in Beck and Tolnay's (1994) three-fold formula for the eruption of racist violence in a community:

1. The extent of the presence of racist ideology
2. Permissiveness of the state response to racist violence
3. Competition for scarce resources

Also recognising the importance of these same 3 factors, Perry (2001) provides an extremely useful and precise explanation of the reasons for many hate crimes in the West:

> "Hate crime then, involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed toward already stigmatized and marginalized groups. As such, it is a mechanism of power and oppression, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterize a given social order. It attempts to re-create simultaneously the threatened (real or imagined) hegemony of the perpetrator's group and the "appropriate" subordinate identity of the victims group. It is a means of marking both the Self and the Other in such a way as to re-establish their "proper" relative positions, as given and reproduced by broader ideologies and patterns of social and political inequality."

The full reasons for white racialist hate crime are almost certainly too complex to distil into 3 or four key variables and will depend very much upon other factors within individual countries, including perceptions of immigration levels, the media, the political situation and cultural influences (Bjorgo and Witte 1993). In order to understand the motives and meanings for white racialists, and how their organisations and activities have evolved in recent years, it is necessary to know more about the cultural, demographic, economic and political context in each society of interest. The reasons for race hate in particular areas of Britain will undoubtedly share many of the core characteristics of other areas and other countries, yet area has its own unique historical influences.

With a particular focus on racism, justice and the policing of black communities in Britain, Ben Bowling and Coretta Phillips (Bowling and Phillips 2002) poignantly describe the emergence, development, philosophy and effects of notions of white racial superiority in the Western World - from the Sixteenth century to the present day. Bowling and Phillips's (2002) powerful summary of the philosophy of the Far Right British National Party (BNP) serves us well in seeking to understand what they are about - particularly their fears that 'white Britain' will be 'swamped' by dark skinned people with 'other' cultures. Such thinking dominates a sizeable number of extremist groups and is shared by a wider proportion of society. For example, the Home Secretary, David Blunkett notoriously used the term "swamping" when referring to the proportions of asylum seekers in British Schools in 2002 (Sutton 2002). Bowling and Philips seminal text is worth repeating here:

> "The British National Party point to a devotion to their 'own' race, with a right to self-preservation. They warn of high ethnic minority birth rates and bemoan the 'inevitable intermingling and intermarriage' that will result in the British nation becoming 'something wholly different, racially and culturally, to what it has been over the past centuries of magnificent British achievement'. As a

solution to this 'problem', they suggest a programme of repatriation which would be, at first, voluntary and later compulsory for all non-whites, including those people whose parents or grandparents were born in Britain."

The BNP have quite a prominent Internet presence and this has probably played a significant role in the communication of ideas by race hate movements in Britain and the United States in recent years. In many cases white racialist hate groups are becoming more political and are seeking to distance themselves from images associated with, so called, red necks or shaven headed racist thugs in boots and braces. Perry (2001), writing about some white racialists in the USA recently becoming political operators, refers to this development as "rhinestone racism" or "button-down-terror". However, what could be termed the *new kidologies of racism* are not yet able to hide the white wolves under sheep clothing. For example, in an article on Mark Collet, leader of the Young British National Party, the journalist Kathy Brewis (Brewis 2002) documents his claims that he is not racist: "Racism is when you hate another ethnic group. We don't hate black people, we don't hate Asians, we don't oppose any ethnic group for what God made them." Yet the racism behind his mask of respectability is soon revealed when later in the interview Collett is reported as saying: "Black men are 60 times more likely to have Aids than a white man." And "Their genes by nature are more promiscuous. When Aids first came out, my dad said they should get together the few people with Aids, drag them off, put a bullet in their heads and we'd have all forgotten about it. I would call it a friendly disease." Such misinformed statements as this are quite typical of those that appear regularly in discussion groups on the Internet, and it is upon these particular racist forums that this article now turns its focus.

NEWSGROUP RESEARCH

Newsgroups are open discussion areas on the Internet that, for some time, have been associated with a variety of online criminal activities (Mann and Sutton, 1998). Although laws framed for the 'offline' world may apply equally when online, the Internet presents a special environment for conducting illegal activities. Newsgroups can bring together people, both offenders and victims, who would not normally have met, thus facilitating new types of criminal organisation and offender-victim interaction. Offenders can also use the new environment to co-operate in circumventing crime prevention measures, or perpetrating previously difficult or impractical crimes (Mann and Sutton 1998).

Research by Back et al (1998) revealed important dimensions of exploitation of Web sites by white racialist groups and that newsgroups have also been part of the dissemination, recruitment and bullying armoury of white racialist groups for several years now. Newsgroups, however, remain strangely under-researched in this area, and indeed in all other areas of criminal and deviant activity. This apparent reluctance of criminologists to study such a rich source of data is difficult to understand, particularly considering the relative ease by which social scientists can study such on-line deviance by using what we have called "invisible non-participant observation" (Mann and Sutton 1998). It appears to us that it is a natural step to undertake an exploratory study of white racists in newsgroups, and the remainder of this paper

presents the initial research findings from a small-scale exploratory research project that was undertaken in 1998 and 1999.

An exploratory study of white racists' use of Internet newsgroups

This study has two main aims: (1) to advance methods for systematically analysing Internet newsgroups [8] and, (2) assess the nature, scope and effect of white racist activity in the newsgroup environment. This second aim is addressed by seeking answers to two questions: firstly, to what extent is the new medium being used to disseminate extreme racist views to UK citizens? Secondly, to what extent are specifically racist or anti-Semitic newsgroups being used to foster a community of white racist/racialist militant activists?

Newsgroup categorisation

To meet the aims of the research it was decided to examine three categories of newsgroup.

A   Newsgroups intended to foster discussions on UK political or cultural issues. These feature discussions of topical social issues, and some of these may be racist in nature.
B   Newsgroups which are intended to host, and be dominated by, overtly racist discussions, or where holocaust denial (revisionism) and other racist material, is being disseminated.
C   Control newsgroups. These are either 'deviant' or 'straight' groups. The data indicates the degree to which the type A and B groups are similar, or differ, from other newsgroups studied in a quantitative analysis of activitiy.

Many of the racists posting to newsgroups also made homophobic statements. This is an aspect that is not fully examined in this paper, but is one that we would like to research in the future. It is also important to mention at this point that this study does not aim to examine the legality of newsgroup contents, since the legality of such content is very difficult to determine, and there are relatively few convictions in the UK for inciting racial hatred.

Newsgroups on the Internet

Newsgroups were one of the first services available on the early Internet and remain popular today as unrestricted publicly accessible discussion areas, in which a wide range of activities take place including posting opinions, debating, advertising, and disseminating computer files. Communication in newsgroups takes the form of 'posts', which are messages or files sharing similar characteristics to emails[9]. However, whereas emails are sent to individuals, or subscribed distribution lists, newsgroup postings are sent to storage areas - analogous to computer folders or directories[10] - where they can to be viewed by anyone. Each newsgroup is named using a hierarchical naming convention, where the titles indicate, but do not dictate,

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[8] This may be of particular concern or interest for UK law enforcement agencies or policy makers.
[9] Anyone who posts to a newsgroup can also be said to have thereby 'published' on the Internet.
[10] Called newsgroups.

the type of messages or discussions to be found within the newsgroup. Messages may stay in a newsgroup for many weeks before the older ones are deleted. As it is possible to reply to messages in a newsgroup, discussions and debates regularly and easily form and evolve over time. At the time of writing, there are approximately 35,000 newsgroups covering a huge range of subjects from particle physics to paintballing.

Contents of newsgroups

Internet users do not need to connect to a single, central point to access newsgroup messages. Instead, each Internet Service Provider (ISP) has a 'newsgroup server' that stores messages for their own customers. All ISPs network their servers together over the Net so that new messages appearing on one server are regularly copied to all the others until all hold a 'local' copy of the message. Allowing for a lag in disseminating messages, all news servers are effectively identical copies of each other. The only exceptions arise in circumstances where messages to a particular newsgroup are frequently offensive or considered as posing some risk to an ISP's customers. In such cases an ISP may opt to refuse to host the newsgroup, and then messages posted exclusively to that newsgroup will not appear on the ISP's server.[11]

Once a message has been copied from the originating news server to another, it is effectively beyond anyone's control, as the receiving machine may do as its owner/controller wishes with its copy of the message. This makes central administration and censorship of the Internet network next to impossible.[12] However, censorship or control of the messages and data carried at the **local level**, on an ISP's newsgroup server, is possible. If the ISP has full control of their server, they are then able to delete messages, or they can refuse to carry newsgroups that frequently contain illegal or offensive material. Alternatively, an ISP can employ staff to regularly examine the contents of suspicious newsgroups, to then identify and delete files and messages they do not wish to disseminate (carry). However, the volume of traffic in some groups is very high, making this is a time consuming and potentially expensive task. Since the Internet is beyond central regulation, in terms of censorship, ISPs also vary in the extent to which they are willing to control access[13].

Equipment used in the newsgroup study.

In the newsgroup study, data was collected on PCs, with standard dial-up accounts, connected to an ISP in the UK - which (at the time) took comprehensive news feed. The research PCs had no connections to other networks or PCs and so were "standalone" machines – which is a necessary precaution for security reasons. The data for the qualitative analysis was collected using the newsreader programs Forte Free Agent and Microplanet Gravity, with some use of the Web sites Deja News

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[11] Internet Service Providers that do not censor in this way, and so allow their customers access to the full list of newsgroups, are said to take a 'full news feed'.
[12] . There is, however, a somewhat limited mechanism for attempting to prevent distribution and this is discussed below under the subheading "*Cancels*".
[13] If ISPs fear this policy will leave them vulnerable to prosecution for obscenity or libel, they may opt to frequently delete or purge contents of the newsgroup, ensuring that it only contains information from the previous few hours, thereby reducing its value and possibly allowing them a legal defence.

(www.deja.com, and groups.google.com) for accessing older archived material. All of the quantitative, statistical data was collected and analysed using purpose built applications written by David Mann, in Microsoft Visual Basic.

Newsgroup selection

Newsgroups may have anything from zero, to many thousands of messages. With over 30,000 newsgroups to consider for inclusion in this study it was impractical to examine them all to identify which ones to look at in more depth. However, a practicable solution soon became apparent. Debates in newsgroups on similar topics can be linked by a practice called *cross* posting, whereby a message is simultaneously sent to more than just one newsgroup. And it is common for replies to cross-posted messages to be cross-posted themselves, thereby creating a dialogue between previously unconnected groups. Messages may be cross-posted because the subject is perceived to be of interest to other groups. For example, a question on UK elections may be posted to *uk.legal* and *uk.politics.misc*. Alternatively, the poster may wish to start an argument or debate by posting to two groups whose readers would normally be opposed to each other's views, such as *alt.religion.christian* and *alt.atheism*. An analysis of cross-posts is, therefore, likely to show the relationships that are supportive, antagonistic and indifferent, between the newsgroups under study.[14] This was the key to this part of our research strategy - to identify suitable racist and anti-racist newsgroups, in order to study the dynamics of racism in that medium.

Data in the form of written posts were collected from a small selection of apparently racist newsgroups, with racist sounding names. After examining the contents of messages in these newsgroups, it was possible to then identify other newsgroups to which participants most frequently cross-posted. This method might be considered as remotely similar to a snowball sample, sometimes used in social research involving hard-to-reach groups, where random samples are unlikely to generate suitable respondents. In a snowball sample, initial contacts are asked to recommend further contacts with the required sample characteristics. The major difference in our on-line research is that participants were simply monitored to see whom they posted to, rather than asked to recommend a suitable interviewee. In effect, what might be called a *surveillance-snowball sample* was taken.

The first data were collected from newsgroups *alt.nationalism.white.power* (a.n.w.p) and *uk.politics.misc* (u.p.m) in August 1999. These initial groups were chosen after a preliminary examination of approximately 40 newsgroups with names indicating that they might contain either racist discourse, or a general discussion of UK political issues. In both cases, an important criterion for selection was the large number of messages appearing in the newsgroup. The first was examined initially because of its explicitly racist title, while the second because it was found to contain lengthy discussions (threads) on issues of race. After studying the groups for a few weeks, and confirming that they would be of interest, a list was made of those other newsgroups to which these first two most commonly cross-posted.

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[14] The results of this analysis of cross-posting between racist newsgroups is presented below in the section covering findings on *Category B* newsgroups.

Newsgroup characteristics

Table 1 shows the number of primary newsgroups examined, their categorisation, the period over which data was collected and the number of messages posted during that time. Newsgroups in Category C were chosen to give a diverse range of **control** groups. The first is one that its own members would call a "binary" group. Here little or no discussion goes on, since most of the files consist of computer software - such as utilities, applications or games. Still images or movies can also be sent to, and downloaded from, binary groups. Binary newsgroups are quite common on Usenet and their characteristics are radically different from others simply because they are used almost exclusively for the transfer of large files and so rarely contain lengthy discussions. The other newsgroup samples include an "illicit" group concerned with discussing hard drugs, a general "chat" group, and a question and answer or "information" group. An important factor in the selection of all of these groups was their relatively high level of activity.

Table 1

Sample newsgroups during period of study[15]				
	Dates (inclusive)			
	From	To	Messages	Mess / Day
Category A (UK discussion)				
Uk.politics.misc	Aug-99	May-00	82700	302
Soc.culture.british	Jan-00	May-00	56000	463
Alt.politics.british	Oct-99	May-00	47500	223
Category B (racist/anti-Semitic)				
Alt.politics.nationalism.white	Aug-99	May-00	46500	170
Alt.revisionism	Sep-99	May-00	113000	465
Alt.politics.white-power	Sep-99	May-00	42500	175
Alt.flame.niggers	Nov-99	May-00	25000	137
Category C (comparator/control)				
Alt.binaries.warez.ibm-pc	Jan-00	Mar-00	146326	2439
Alt.drugs.hard*	Apr-99	May-00	42000	106
Uk.local.london	Jan-00	May-00	26000	215
Microsoft.public.excel.programming	Jan-00	Apr-00	23000	253
*not continuous				

The racist groups under consideration are comparable in size to other large newsgroups discussing broad political or topical issues - although the largest political newsgroups, such as *alt.politics.usa.republican* can attract 800-900 posts per day, which is 2-6 times the size of these newsgroups. It should also be noted that the number of posts in the Category B groups are somewhat overstated due to particular, yet numerous, disruptive activities that are unique to this category. To avoid digressing to far from the thematic structure of this paper, these are discussed in depth below, under the *ForgerBot* subheading.

A simple measure of the average message length of newsgroup messages yields a value of approximately 80 lines per post. On face value, this actually overestimates the volume of original material within the group, because it is common practice to reproduce and include lines from a message when replying to it. Even after making some allowances for such factors, it is plain that reading and assessing every new message posted to these newsgroups would take many hours each day - due to the size of the groups. Therefore, only messages with a subject line appearing relevant to this study were examined in closer detail. In the Category B groups, where many of the subject lines appeared relevant, we concentrated on long *threads*. A thread is a series of linked, follow-up messages which can ultimately be traced back to a single originating message. Threads can be thought of as conversations where each message is a reply to a previous message in the thread. The topic or 'subject line' of the thread

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[15] Alt. = alternative; Soc. = society; UK and Microsoft are self-explanatory.

should indicate its contents, but frequently the focus of the messages will move 'off topic' as the thread develops.

Figure 1 shows a thread as it appears in the newsreader Forte Free Agent. Numbers in the subject column indicate the message's length, whist text in the subject column indicates either the message author's email address or the subject of the message/thread (in bold). The thread shown, entitled *'Re: Adolf Hitler: A Martyr For The White Race',* shows 26 messages in the thread. Indentation implies that the message is sent in reply to the message above it, which may be some lines further up the thread. Long threads frequently indicate lengthy discussions on items of particular interest to the group and/or the presence of a *flame war* (discussed later, below). It is important to note that we are not implying in any way that those shown on Figure 1 are racists, because many of those participating in these news groups are anti-racists and it is also possible for someone to fraudulently send a message as though it came from an email address belonging to someone else.

Figure 1
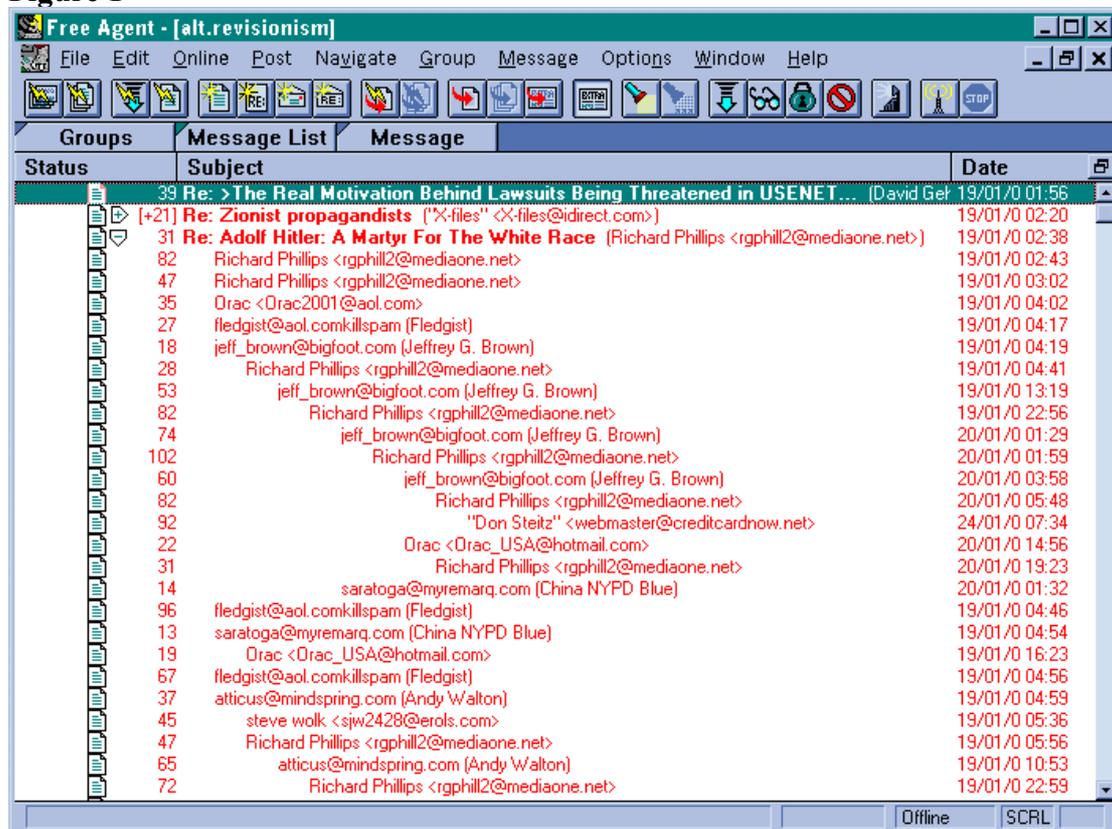
Degree of activity

A large number of messages were sent to the category B (racist groups) in the early hours of the morning, when little or no activity might be expected. The date and local time at which a message is sent is included in the header of the message. The header is the section of the post that contains all the message's technical information - such as the email address of the sender; the number of lines in the message; or other groups to which the message has been sent. For the specific purposes of this study, a program was written to extract and collate this data from the headers of the messages - thereby

allowing us to examine the activity in the newsgroups hour by hour. A summary of the results is presented in Figure 2[16].

Figure 2
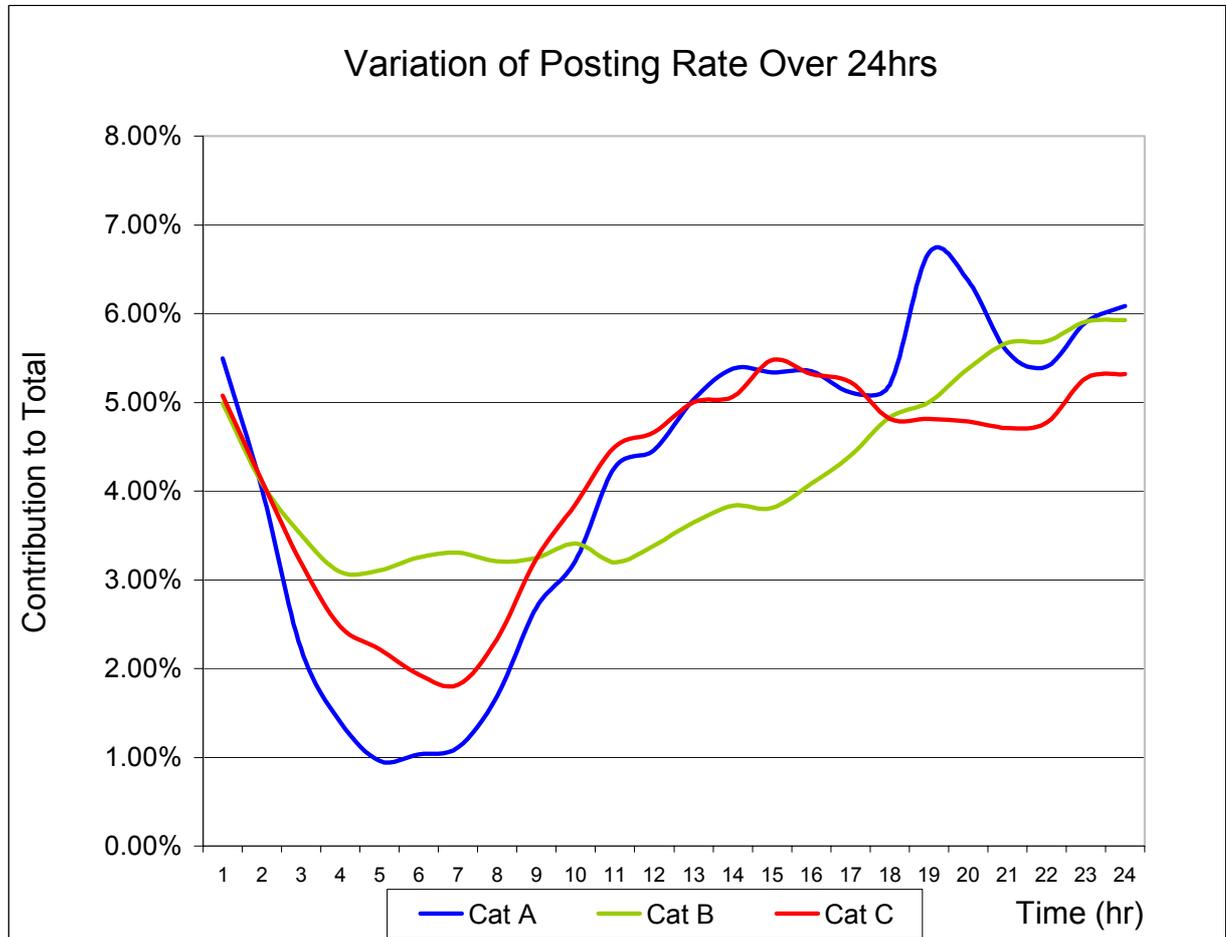
There was a marked drop in activity Category C control groups from 2am to approximately 9am **local time**, which would be the expected pattern. However, this usual pronounced night-time drop was not seen in the openly racist groups and it is unclear what caused this difference, although it is possible to speculate that it might be because more members of these groups are unemployed, retired, and/or work particular shift patterns. Other possible explanations include 1) an unwillingness to post to these groups while in the workplace during the day; 2) a greater use of methods [17] to hide the user's identity; or 3) a greater willingness or ability to post to the newsgroups in the early hours of the morning. These factors were deemed likely to alter the hourly posting rate within other deviant or objectionable groups. To test this theory, the data from the deviant, Category C group *alt.drugs.hard* was examined and found to show similar characteristics to the openly racist newsgroups. The difference is clearly illustrated in Figure 3, where the data from *alt.drugs.hard* has been extracted from the Category C curve, and added to the Category B data.

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[16] Due to the unique characteristics of binary groups the figures for *alt.binaries.warez.ibm* were excluded from this analysis.
[17] Such as anonymous remailers which may delay a message and give it a new posting time, or web mail services which mask the users identity to some extent

Categories A and C groups have then been combined to give the rate of posting for deviant and non-deviant groups.

Figure 3
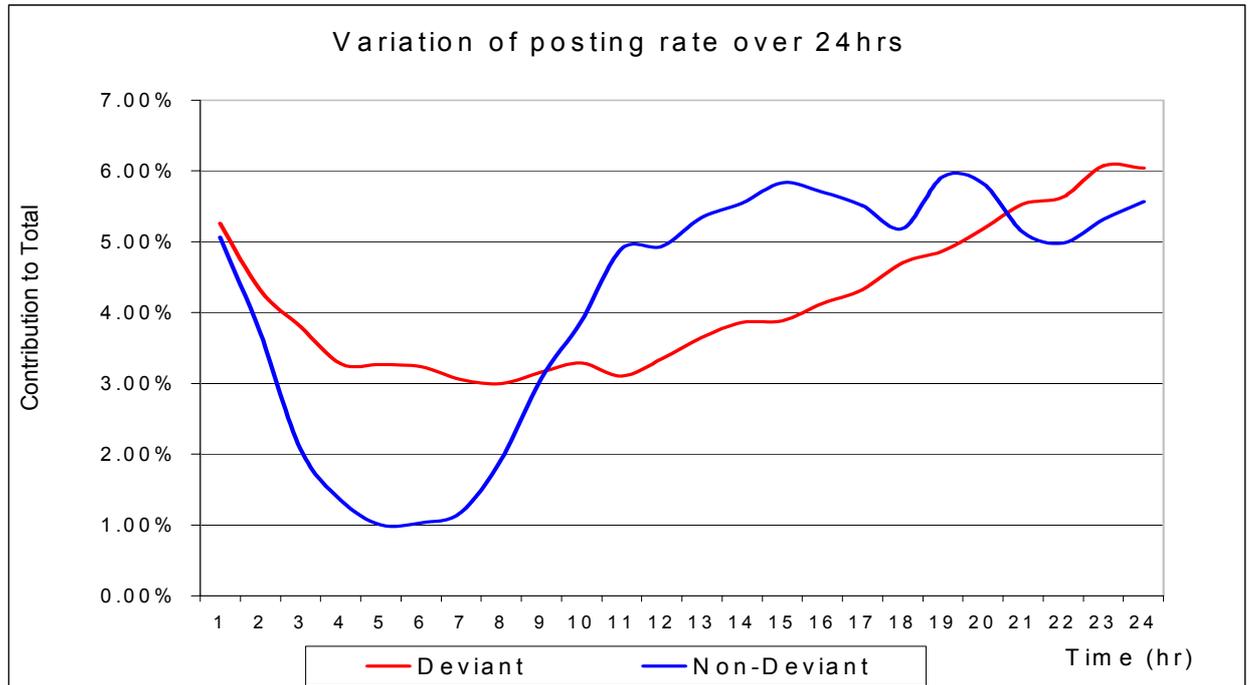
The data supports the proposition that deviant groups have a higher rate of posting during the early morning than non-deviant ones. It should be remembered, however that this is little more than a case study examination and that further research is needed to see if this trait is evident in other, and a wider range of, deviant newsgroups. Although it can be said that this provisional finding raises the possibility that a time of posting factor could be used, along with others, to screen groups for further analysis.

Participants

Table 3 shows the most active participants in one of the newsgroups under study, uk.politics.misc, - at least based on the number of messages posted during the first six months of the study[18]. The participant's names have been anonymised for this publication.

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[18] Participants may post to the groups under multiple email addresses, for example, they may be using more than one ISP. Therefore the use of email address does not necessarily record all the contributions from each participant.

Table 3

	Top 10 participants (Total unique participants during study period = 2552)	Posts per top 10 participant (Total number of messages during study period = 42,785)
1	Anon<bl	1777
2	Anon@aol.co	1634
3	Anon@post.alm	1517
4	Anon <abelar	1508
5	Anon <pah	1273
6	Anon@plonk.co.	1167
7	Anon@	1105
8	Anon@aol.co	969
9	Anon<	791
10	Anon@ya	684

A significant proportion of the total messages in the group come from a relatively small percentage of the total number of participants. Over the first six months of the study 2552 different people posted to uk.politics.misc. The top 1% of posters (23 people) contributed 45% of the messages posted and the top 10% provided 83% of the posts. Similar figures were obtained for all newsgroups in the study with the exception of the binary group *alt.binaries.warez.ibm-pc*. This supports the observation that some newsgroups are dominated by a relatively small core group of people (Mann and Sutton, 1998), and given that Mann and Sutton's 1998 research reveals that newsgroups have many more non-participants (*lurkers*) than active members, this means that the most dominant members seek to control much of the content and debate that takes place in newsgroups and is visible to anyone visiting the group.

In a newsgroup characterised by debate, such as in the Category A and B groups, some of the discussions rapidly develop into exchanges of personal abuse or a series of simple assertions without any evidence or argument. These are common on Usenet, and have become known as 'flame wars'. During a flame war the participant's posts may become very short (and abusive) and very frequent (often at least hourly). These flame wars can dominate some groups and consequently those involved will rank high in a table of most frequent posters, pushing some influential but more restrained members of the group down the table. The flame wars in this study were most likely to involve racists 'against' anti-racists. Other types of newsgroup may have less of this kind of activity as one participant noted:

> *"I spend quite some time on Alt music. Why is it that there is absolutely no angst on those NewsGroups?*. Why is it that on alt politics N.G.s there is seldom intelligent debate? Mayhem and slanging matches abound. Most answers contribute nothing to the discussion, they think it is good to just call someone names."

By comparing the most frequent posters tables from different months it was found that while some people remain as almost permanent fixtures in this high posters

group, other discussants drift in, and then out, over a period of a few months. This is also true of some of those who posted racist views or comments. A reading of the messages posted indicates that these people first post a few messages as part of an ongoing discussion, but their messages did not indicate any strong political views, or well developed position. They then progress to posting more frequently and begin to state plainly what their views are. Such views may then be challenged, which raises the possibility of a flame war - where all participants subsequently move higher up the frequent poster's table. This process may be repeated many times before the poster gradually stops posting to the newsgroup. It is unclear why some participants withdraw in this way, but possibly they are offended by the insults directed at them in the flame war, or just as likely they have either become bored, achieved their objectives, or failed to perceive themselves as "winning" the argument and so retreated. Another explanation may be that they abandon their old email address and return to the group under a new guise. Although there is little direct evidence for this, there is a substantial amount of evidence suggesting that many people are protective of their online persona. Another factor may be the degree of support they receive, or not, from 'fellow' racists or anti-racists.

In some single topic newsgroups, those regarded by the group as 'experts' and 'organisers' are identifiable, for example by being credited with producing the group's FAQ[19] or by comments from other participants. Within newsgroups we have studied in the past (Mann and Sutton 1998), one of the defining factors in determining status is possession of demonstrable knowledge of the groups' primary activity, because in newsgroups 'knowledge is power'. In the groups studied here, this currency was absent - probably because there was no clearly identifiable agreement about the possession of, and definition of, knowledge. Therefore, it was not possible to clearly identify people performing administrative or guru-type roles. Nonetheless, there was evidence that some racists and anti-racists supported their allies. To provide an example, the first quotation that follows is believed to be a call for assistance to an anti-racist 'guru': *As for your quote, I'll wait for one of Kit's highly effective dissections of your "sources".* In the next example, a 'new' racist is encouraged by an established participant *'Doug, You are 100% correct regards, Billy.'*

Despite the fact that determining nationality online is problematic, especially in newsgroups where some participants may wish to remain anonymous, it was clear from the things they wrote that a considerable majority of the participants in the Category A newsgroups were UK residents. However, those in the Category B were predominantly resident in North America.

UK political discussion newsgroups (Category A)

"Now is the time to grasp the weapon which is the Net and wield it skilfully and wisely while you may do so freely… We must move beyond our present domain and take up position in the mainstream"

Milton Kleim Jr.

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[19] Frequently Asked Questions – a document which may attempt to set the group's boundaries and acts as a guide for new-comers to the group. It is frequently posted to the newsgroup so that it is always available.

One of the reasons for studying newsgroups that focus upon UK political issues was to determine whether of not they are being used to foster or disseminate racist views or abuse. The group under closest examination, as mentioned above, was *uk.politics.misc*, but *alt.politics.england.misc*, and *alt.politics.uk* were also examined. It should be noted, at this point, that we did not find any newsgroups *specifically* aimed at encouraging racism or anti-Semitism in the UK. However, a few of the participants in the UK politics groups did occasionally post or cross-post to the overtly racist, Category B groups.

Discussion topics

After examining the Category A groups over a 4-week period, and classifying the topics of discussions, it is estimated that around 10-20% of the total messages were contained in threads discussing immigration, race, ethnicity, or anti-Semitic issues. The subject line of these threads ranged from deceptively straightforward yet provocative propositions such as: 'Should immigration be stopped?[20]; '76000 Asylum seekers last year', to the more inflammatory - 'Brits revolt against 3rd World parasites'; 'Legislation for our extinction' and 'holoHoax in classrooms[21]'. The subject of race and ethnicity, whilst not dominating the Category A groups, was a constant point of discussion in one form or another. This relatively high volume of debate on race and immigration issues is perhaps not surprising in the context of the large amount of general UK media coverage in this area at the time of the study. Most other subjects discussed in these newsgroups were topical and transitory in nature.

During a discussion on the diversity of the people who constituted the newsgroups, the assertion that regular posters were very widely diverse in their political views was not challenged and neither was the point that the group was 'over-stuffed with racists'. When commenting on this, one member who regularly posted on racist issues stated: '*We do NOT have access to other media… they don't print or let us speak our views. Usenet does.*' This implies that, in some cases, racists are entering newsgroup discussions simply because they provide an outlet for their extreme views. These members do not feel the need to create a newsgroup specifically for discussing issues solely from the white racist perspective (*uk.politics.whites-only* say), although this would be a relatively simple task, instead they wish, or are content, to debate in the mainstream UK political groups.

Interaction between members

Patterns appeared to emerge quite rapidly in the interactions between group members in threads discussing issues concerned with race. A thread would typically be initiated by a racist comment on a current item in the news. These pieces usually set out an argument and tended to be longer than the average post (20-30 lines say). This would then spark-off a number of messages in which we usually saw one or all of the following themes emerge as an underlying force behind the dialogue: *Identity; Control; Conflict and Disorder; Items without responses.*

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[20] Incidentally, this thread contained more than 400 posts.
[21] Referring to particular anti-Semitic Jewish conspiracy theory that the holocaust never took place on the scale that is generally accepted.

Identity

The real identity, or cultural background, of posters to the newsgroups appears to be very important to some members. Such information is customarily used in an attempt to devalue the argument by attacking perceived characteristics of the person putting forward the argument. If aspects of identity cannot be ascertained then various methods of goading are used. While this takes place it is common for the original argument to be forgotten completely; a process reminiscent of school playgrounds. Over time, perceptive or persistent members of the group are able to build up informative 'pictures' of the other members. Some members appear to become frustrated when they cannot ascertain the background of another poster. An astute participant saw this irony and posted a long list of contradictory attributes before signing off with the lines: *'Maybe I'm black, [...] Maybe I'm asian. Maybe I'm Gay. Maybe I'm Straight. The point is here YOU CAN'T TELL CAN YOU? At the risk of sounding patronising, I suggest you learn from that'.* Finally, another important aspect of identity is the language used in these newsgroups, while both USA and British newsgroups are clearly distinct by certain phrases and concerns, they do share a lot of international language and beliefs.

Control

Control, or at the very least, "occupation", of the environment seems very important to some members of the group. As one member stated, *'I wouldn't even consider giving this NG back to the fairy cakes, welfare queens, maggot boys, [...]'.* This post received the following reply: *'It's never been dominated by them since I've been here (just over 2 years), but neither would I like to see it become dominated by the Extreme-Right, which unfortunately seems to be the current trend.'* It seems from such messages that some feel compelled to "occupy" this virtual space and put forward counter arguments just so that other participants do not go unopposed.

Conflict and disorder

The conflict and disorder features of the newsgroups in this study distinguish them from other newsgroups that the authors have studied in the past. These could not be regarded as an "information" type newsgroups, like the hacker groups studied in the past by two authors of this study (Mann and Sutton 1998). The posting of provocative pieces was answered in kind, and this type of conflict may constitute a kind of informal social control. This is because the initial effect of creating conflict in the group is that it prevents the far-right/racist/anti-Semitic elements from forming a cohesive structure and occupying the group, possibly through diversion into petty argument (above). However, we can see no reason to believe this is a stable state of affairs and the groups could easily evolve over time to the advantage of racist members.

Items without responses

There appeared to be very few items (such as reposting newspaper stories) on race and immigration issues that did not attract attention and debate from the group. Those items which were ignored, or attracted little attention, seemed to be among the most extreme racist contributions, such as a post congratulating and supporting the at-that-time unidentified Brick Lane Bomber, who the poster referred to as a "Saxon hero". Other examples were regular posts from an individual who reproduced articles from newspapers around the world detailing serious violent crimes in which the murderer, or suspect, was identified as being black and stated that this was: '*typical nigger behaviour'*. In this case he was also using the newsgroup to advertise his Web site which carried an archive of such stories.

Ignoring certain participants is certainly a deliberate tactic. However, the nature of newsgroups is such that participants are unable to resist telling others that they are ignoring them: '*Rather than killfile[22] you, I just ignore most of your posts, especially the ones which have an 'all non-aryans are criminals' theme to them (i.e. most of them)!'*

Interestingly, the poster on the Brick Lane Bomber managed to initiate debate only after restraining his language and posting less provocative items on multi-racialism to a completely different newsgroup which was interested in sailing (and was hence possibly, less politically aware). Posters in this newsgroup found his messages '*thought provoking'* and there was some doubt about the sincerity of his racist language and argument, although evidence of his extremism was readily available in other newsgroups. Other evidence that extreme racist views are unwelcome was found when messages were cross-posted from the Category B groups to other, non-related newsgroups. Participants in these groups did not appreciate being 'infiltrated' and sent clear messages to those attempting to engage them in discussion from overtly racist groups: '*Hey what's your problem? Why do you penetrate us with this nazi shit? im sick of all this facists'* (sic).

Summary of Key points from research in Category A - political discussion newsgroups

- Individual racists are active in UK political discussion newsgroups, and there is some evidence of activity by UK political parties such as the BNP.
- Racists and anti-racists are among the most frequent posters or participants.
- Racist appear see the political discussion newsgroups as a mainstream outlet for their views.
- There is little argument based on evidence.
- Exchanges of abuse are frequent.
- There is some limited visible evidence to suggest that racists have developed an online support network based upon newsgroup membership.
- There appeared to be little or no technical disruption to the group's threads (see *Features of the Netwar,* below).

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[22] Newsgroup viewers can be instructed to automatically ignore, hide or delete messages from individuals whose names appear in the Killfile.

Racist Newsgroups (Category B)

The activity in the openly racist newsgroups was radically different from the UK political groups (Category A) and it soon became apparent that these newsgroups were dominated by conflict between those racists who posted to the newsgroup and those who opposed them. Conflicts of this kind, and on the same scale, exist in other newsgroups, for example in alt.religion.scientology, and have become commonly known as "Netwars" or "flame wars". As with most *Netwars* in newsgroups, there were many other everyday activities taking place simultaneously within the group. Another feature of these groups is the extent of cross posting. An overview of the devices and behaviour that facilitate and characterise the conflict are presented in this section, followed by an examination of the other everyday type of exchanges between members that continued in spite of this surrounding *noise of Netwar*.

Figure 4 illustrates the extent of cross posting between the newsgroups in Category B, and others. These groups are part of a much wider network, but the figure shows the strongest links between the groups studied. The width of the connecting lines is proportional to the number of messages cross-posted during the study, whilst the *diameter* of the groups is to the same scale, and proportional to the number of messages appearing in the group. This representation, although slightly unorthodox, gives a clear indication of the proportion of messages cross-posted from one group to another by simply comparing the width of the connection to the width of the group.

Figure 4
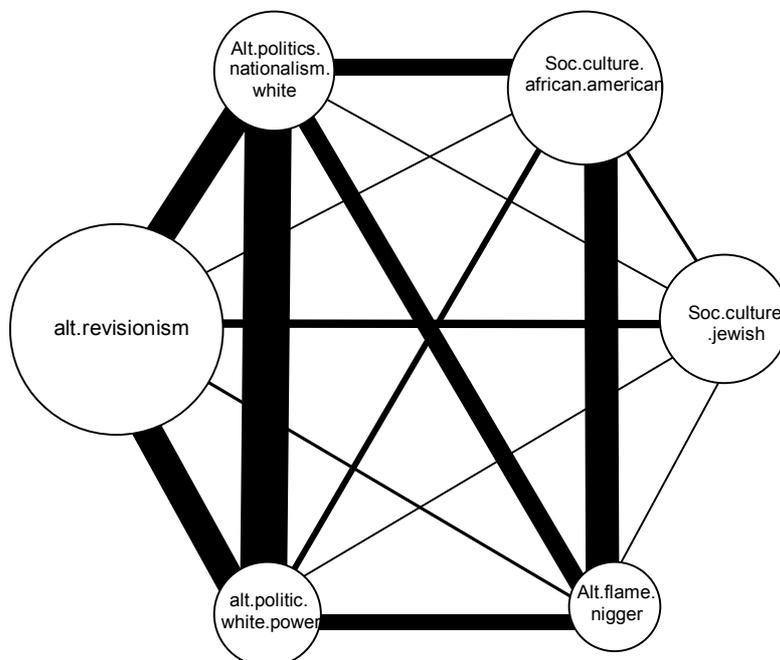
The three groups to the left of the figure are heavily linked by cross posting – far more than we found in our analysis of other newsgroups in this study. It is unclear why there is so much cross posting. It may be that some writers seek support for their views from posters in other related groups. Perhaps the community has also become

fragmented across too many newsgroups with no meaningful hierarchy or raison d'être.

As can be seen from Figure 4, there is a considerable amount cross posting from racist newsgroups to other newsgroups that are antithetical to racist views. The strong link between soc.culture.african american and alt.flame.niggers is caused by derogatory messages being cross-posted to both groups, indeed it can be seen that the first of these groups is heavily 'polluted' by messages from racist groups. Although not shown on this figure, it was found that soc.culture.jewish was very heavily cross-posted to with anti-Semitic messages from other newsgroups. The high level of antagonism between these racist and anti-racist groups and the extent of the taunting and offensive remarks is discussed below.

Features of the *Netwar*

Flames
As mentioned earlier, many messages consisted of short insults to other posters. These were usually exchanged between people who appeared to 'know' each other, since references were frequently made to previous messages that an antagonist posted to the group, sometimes much earlier. The insults would typically consist of a mixture of four letter words and an attack on their antagonist's intelligence or sexual practices. A surprisingly large number of messages, especially in the 'revisionist' newsgroup, comprised of very simple taunting by anti-racists or just simply calling their particular racist opponent a liar, although detailed arguments did occasionally take place. Whilst the programmes used for the analysis did not measure the extent of the *Netwar* directly, it is felt to be a partial measure of its impact that that 25% of the messages to *alt.politics.white-power* were in single threads of 10 or more messages, whilst figures for *uk.local.london,* and *alt.drugs.hard,* are 8% and 6% respectively.

The lack of inhibition displayed in flame wars may be partly accounted for by the 'unreality' or 'Internet disinhibition' thought to be identified with Internet activity (Sutton and Grifiths 2002). That said, online activity does not take place in a environment completely divorced from reality, because much comment was made in newsgroups when Yale Eideken from the Nizkor Foundation took out a prosecution against "Doc Tavish" (Scott Bradbury) for alleged threats made against him during a flame war.

ForgerBot/Sporger/Robotic Poet
During the study, it soon became evident that many of the messages in the Category B groups were nothing more than gibberish verses, reminiscent of the cut-and-paste works of the 60s (apologies to fans of the style). Although these messages appeared to be from long standing contributors to the group, who were high in the posters league, it soon became clear that they were in fact forged messages that were being posted to the newsgroup daily with the intent of disrupting the space and making it unusable. Estimating of the number of forged messages in the group is problematic and time consuming, due to the number and perfection of the forgeries. However, we estimate that during some periods in the study that at least 20% of the group's messages were being forged. It is clear that no one person could possibly write so many messages and it was universally acknowledged by posters to the group that a sophisticated,

automated computer program was being deployed. Analysis of the timestamps on the messages,[23] and the usual "time signature" support this assertion. Once members worked out what was happening, this program became known in the newsgroup as the "ForgerBot" the "Robotic Poet" or the "Sporger." [24]

Newsgroup participants can normally instruct their newsreader program to ignore messages from individuals they dislike or do not want to read, (known as "killfiling") and this feature should have allowed the group to continue in the midst of this disruption. However, the Sporger's messages were so well forged that these filters were not able to separate them from the messages created by the 'real' posters. To make matters even more difficult for the group, the cut-and-paste method provided content which was syntactically plausible and the message length was selected to match others in the thread. This prohibited messages being filtered on an automated content analysis. It appears likely that the messages were specifically constructed in this way to avoid methods of filtering and thereby maximise their disruptive impact on the newsgroup. Headway was only made in our numerical analysis of the group's activities by analysing the route the message had taken across the Internet.

The aim of the ForgerBot was obviously to disrupt the group and it achieved this in 3 main ways: 1) It made the newsgroup hard to read and its arguments and discussions hard to follow; 2) it added considerably to the volume of messages and information in the group; and 3) it had the disconcerting effect of calling into doubt the link between the user-id of the posters and their Internet persona or voice. The ForgerBot messages started in September 1998 and gradually died out during the course of this study for no apparent reason, although it was known that during this time the FBI had been asked to investigate.

As it appeared to some that the Forgerbot was targeting proclaimed racists within the group more than others, it was stated by many that this was the work of Jewish organisations - such as the Simon Weistenthal Centre or Nizkor - which they frequently involved in racist conspiracy theories. However, there was no evidence to support this and it later transpired that there were many other newsgroups under "Sporger" attack. Some commentators stated that the activity was primarily focussed on disrupting the newsgroup alt.religion.scientology – which had been involved in a long running, fierce and escalating Netwar between pro and anti-scientologists. [25]

Cancels (Deletions)

Sometimes newsreader software would indicate that a message was available for reading, but when it was requested the message did not exist because it had been deleted from the server. This is because it is possible for messages to a newsgroup to be deleted by sending a 'Cancel' request. Message cancellations of this kind can be posted by the message's author, or by the system administrator (sysadmin) of a news server, and they propagate across the Usenet network in much the same way as a normal message. Once a cancel request arrives on a news server, the message it applies to is deleted. The cancel is then forwarded to other news servers it has contact with and does the same. The high percentage of cancelled messages in the race hate
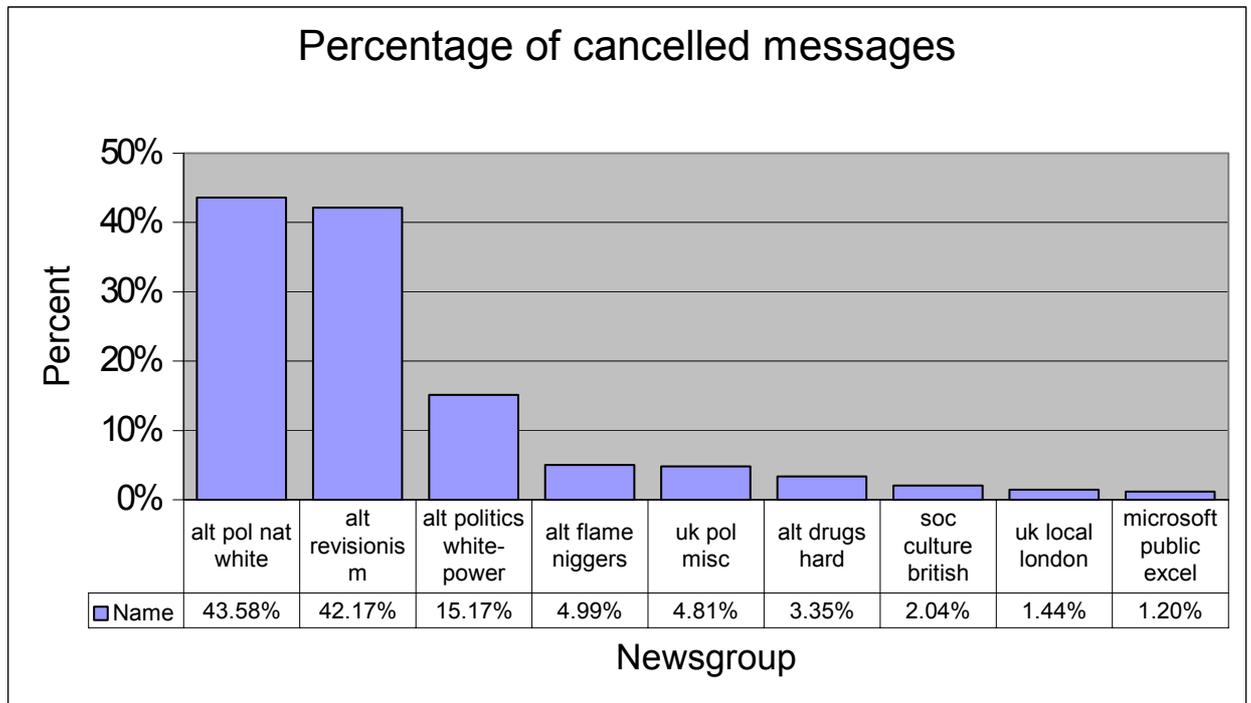
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[23] See http://holysmoke.org/forgeries/forged.htm or http://www.bernie.cncfamily.com/sporg.htm

[24] Sporger from "Spam" and "Forger". "Bot" is short for "robot" – a computer program which automates common Internet tasks.

[25] From a technical view the Forgerbot is one of the most interesting aspects of the groups, and suggests a fruitful source for further study into online activism.

groups, compared with others in the study, is shown in figure 5, below:

Figure 5.

Percentage of cancelled messages

	alt pol nat white	alt revisionism	alt politics white-power	alt flame niggers	uk pol misc	alt drugs hard	soc culture british	uk local london	microsoft public excel
☐ Name	43.58%	42.17%	15.17%	4.99%	4.81%	3.35%	2.04%	1.44%	1.20%

Newsgroup

Many of the ForgerBot messages in the groups were being cancelled by diligent sysadmins and this accounts for a proportion of the cancellations. By taking "snapshot" samples of messages in the groups, it was found that valid messages from known racists were being cancelled as well. The aim, once more, was to silence the racist voices within the newsgroup. These cancellations seemed to be caused by activists who had the ability to forge cancel requests and inject them into the Usenet network. At least one hacker group had written a program to do this and stated on their Web page that they would 'license' it to individuals who could demonstrate that they would use it for a praiseworthy cause. Again, the use of such sophisticated software by activists appears to be an area that is ripe for further study.

Trolls
Trolls are people who post to a newsgroup with the intention of starting a flame war. Their aim appears to be nothing more than having malicious fun at other's expense. Their primary method of attack is to either post provocative questions, thereby exposing any latent tensions between group members, or by forging contentious messages (usually not very well) from regular contributors. They disrupt the group by diverting it into acrimonious debate and/or swamping the space with flame wars.

It is impossible to quantify Troll activity within a newsgroup without reading all the messages posted and compiling statistics by hand, and even this will be prone to a margin of error. However, Troll activity within a newsgroup can be estimated, relative to other groups, by examining the incidence of messages being cross-posted to known Troll newsgroups. Although we did see some Troll activity the task of quantifying it was not completed for the groups under study, as it was clear that the ForgerBot, Cancels and spontaneous flame wars dominated the group.

The structure of the newsgroup itself was obviously under heavy attack from the four activities outlined above. This level of Netwar appeared to be a feature in other 'fringe' or minority newsgroups that are also under attack from people opposed to their views. The most infamous Netwar to date is between The Church of Scientology and 'anti-cultists' within alt.scientology. At times this conflict has involved the FBI, and seizure of foreign computer systems (anonymous remailers) in Finland. Anyone new to Usenet would have found the newsgroup confusing and hard to penetrate during this period, nevertheless, the regular posters to the group were not deterred. This is an important point and may explain why so little criminological research has been conducted into the social dynamics of newsgroups. To conduct research into newsgroups it is necessary to understand the culture of the group, and what is going on within it. To achieve that level of understanding requires many days and weeks of lurking, to become familiar and eventually informed (see Mann and Sutton 1998).

Interaction between members
Debate within the Category B newsgroups continued despite the disruptions outlined above. The same underlying themes of discourse within the Category A groups: identity; control and conflict were also witnessed here. However, with the Category B groups, we now turn to the initial postings in debates (or flame wars), as it is around these initiating documents that the newsgroup's dialogue revolves.

Feelings of race hatred were openly admitted to in these groups, whereas in the UK discussion groups (Category A) there was an attempt by some members with racist views to deny that they were racist. Such denials usually involve people arguing that they do not "hate" anyone but that they are, instead, a "white separatist", racialist, and/or just taking a pragmatic response to their perceived problems of a multi-racial society. Their purported aim is to protect 'British culture' from the supposed threat of 'multiculturalism'. This argument appears to coincide with those currently employed by political parties on the extreme right of British politics.

Initial postings in the Category B groups were typically found to consist of either a comparatively long statement of the poster's personal beliefs, or a reproduction of a book, an article from a newspaper, or a link to a Web site. These texts are used in an attempt to reinforce or support the racist views held by some of those in the group. This behaviour differs from members in the Category C (control groups) where threads would typically start with a specific question for which the poster needed an answer or a short and simple assertion intended to start debate (e.g.: *"Why don't the tube strikers go back to work?"*).

Posting of overtly racist, anti-Semitic or homophobic opinion and comment made up the majority of first posts in the *white-power* and *nationality.white* newsgroups. Common features of these posts include:

- *The creation of an 'other'*. A few anti-racists recognise the underlying theme of many of the posts, which inherently imply an *'US'* and *'THEM'*. The writers frequently claim to be representing or fighting to protect, the *'white race'* against other races or hostile groups. If it is pointed out that racist organisations have very little support, the racists then identify the 'Jewish owned media' or the 'liberal elite' for misleading the white populace. Probably in an attempt to

maintain this us-and-them distinction, white anti-racists are referred to *as 'Wiggers'* (white niggers).

- *Dehumanisation.* Black people were always referred to using highly offensive terms such as *'niggers', 'mud races', 'shit skinned'*. Some posts referred to TNB *('Typical Nigger Behaviour'*) and this becomes a well worn phrase when discussing stories of drugs dealing or violent crimes involving a black perpetrator.
- *Conspiracy theories.* These are wide ranging and can be quite involved (e.g. see Barkun 1998), although they are built up from similar elements - the controlling influences are seen as *'the Jews'* or *'liberal elites'* while the entire black population or the multi-racial society are seen as their weapon of control. Bizarre all-in-one theories tried to integrate multiple conspiracies. For example, more than once it was proposed or stated as fact, in the newsgroups studied, that Aids was a virus created by Jews and spread among black Africans as a method of destroying white Americans and Europeans.

Posting of so called 'factual' information, to support racist, anti-Semitic or homophobic views, is common. There are more articles concerning the holocaust in the revisionist and white-power newsgroups, although there is also a great deal of cross-posting and duplication between all the Category B groups (see Figure 5). Both the racists and anti-racists frequently draw upon external sources or references to justify their position. Some articles, such as the *'66 questions about the holocaust',* are posted regularly, even though they had been systematically refuted more than once. Debates over evidence normally peter out when one side cannot support the position any longer, or the debate develops into a flame war. In these cases, as explained above, the anti-racist participants normally brand the racist members as liars.

Other dynamic characteristics of these newsgroups

So-called evidence was frequently used to propose that action be taken to protect *'our culture', 'race', or 'heritage'*. As there never is any actual evidence in such messages to refute, the anti-racists usually counter by finding flaws such as: *'If whites are so superior then how come…'*etc etc, or by attacking the person who is posting e.g.: *'If you're so smart then how come you can't spell…'* etc.

Sometimes very lengthy documents are posted, such as a reproduction of the Unabomber Manifesto, which is intended to make the article available in the public domain - rather than specifically aiming to start a debate within the newsgroup. Such posts are usually ignored, possibly because of their length.

The posting of messages asking for help or assistance, or seeking to build a more cohesive online racist community, is relatively uncommon considering the volume of traffic in these groups. At the time of writing, it is estimated that one message of this type is posted approximately once a week. Examples include one call for help in founding an *'Irish 'National Socialist Party'*, while another advertising *'Warrior Camp Training'* in the USA for *'activists who seek to become involved in the pro-majority cause' featuring "instruction, including computer, drill and weaponry'*. In most cases these messages could have been replied to offline, or using private emails. It is not known to what extent the ability to post such messages and make

off-line contact with others is facilitating a more cohesive and dynamic national and international *meatspace* community among extreme racists. Again, this is another area warranting further research.

Summary of Key points from research in Category B - racist newsgroups

- Overtly racist newsgroups are heavily connected via 'cross-posting' both to each other, and to groups where they are likely to antagonise or cause offence.
- These groups, along with a few others with 'extreme' positions were subject to massive technical disruption at the time of this study - in a number of different ways. This was most likely to be the work of activists opposed to their views, rather than a random attack.
- Racist positions presented in the threads are frequently based on so-called 'evidence' and quoted sources, although the legitimacy of these is frequently under question by others. Participants are frequently involved in flame wars with anti-racists.

THE EVOLUTION OF HATE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

There are a number of questions will need to be addressed in future research projects that cannot be covered in this small-scale exploratory study[26]:

1. As a result of the revolution in communications technology are white racists creating new crime waves, becoming involved in new crimes or ways of offending?
2. Has the Internet led to more effective or extensive networking among white racists?
3. Has the Internet increased membership of white racialist organisations and groups
4. In terms of day to day racially motivated violence that takes place in our towns and cities, what are the direct links between white racialist Web sites and street level violence
5. Which social groups have less access to the Internet than others? White working class males are (one of several groups of) racist perpetrators who are also frequently disempowered, marginalised, disenfranchised and socially excluded. Does this mean that members of other social groups, with relatively more/better Internet access, are more likely to become perpetrators in the Information Age?

At the very least, newsgroups provide an enabling environment (Perry 2001) for racially motivated violence. This may have serious implications for community safety in our town and cities. For example, Levin and McDevitt (1993) found that hate motivated violence in the USA was three times more likely than other violent crimes to result in the victim requiring hospital treatment. This increase in the level of

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[26] The authors are grateful to Dr Coretta Phillips for raising the importance of these issues.

violence used in hate crimes is in part explained by the depersonalisation that many hate crime offenders employ in justifying their offences - treating their victims as less than human. This is plainly evident on the Internet where shockingly dehumanising levels of hostility are given voice in the terms used to describe and deride people from minority ethnic groups. For example, many participants in newsgroups are clearly on a "mission of hate", frequently describing black people as mud or "shit coloured". Just days after the murder of James Byrd in the USA (dragged to death behind a pick-up) on-line Identity Group adherents in the newsgroup alt.politics.white were gloating over, justifying and celebrating the murder of yet another black man by their fellow white racists.

Since research reveals that organised hate groups use the Internet to spread disinformation regarding racial superiority, and to inspire violence against people and property, it is important for us to know more about the dynamics of on-line hate groups. It is particularly important to understand more about the relationship between the Internet presence of white racists and their own violent tactics. It is just as important to find out whether the violence of others is also influenced by such racist missionary zeal, particularly since Sibbitt (1997) found that teenage perpetrators of racial violence are receptive to the racist views of older youths and organised racist events. More research in this area will help to determine important policy questions regarding the threat that the powerful and growing Internet presence of racist groups might pose to community safety, democracy and on-line minority social interests in the Information Age (Wiesenthal Centre 2002).

Despite the growth and established position of the Far Right on Internet Web sites, activists are quite effectively policing through dialogue and disruption, thereby exercising informal control and containing the activities of many white racists in newsgroups. Because of these anti-racist activities, newsgroups have not given white racists, white racialists, neo-nazis, homophobes and the Far Right the unfettered access to this section of the Internet that they had hoped for. Our findings support those of Becker et al (2000). Namely, that while racist debate in newsgroups is often passionate and heated, many of these groups are actually dominated by non-racists. However, there are other issues besides dominance concerning deviant use of newsgroups. An earlier study (Mann and Sutton, 1998) highlights the fact that newsgroups can bring together groups of people who would not normally have met. These associations can then: a) provide a support network for deviant behaviour and, b) facilitate the co-ordination of resources to tackle complicated or large-scale problems and tasks ('project' crimes; see McIntosh 1971). To date, however, we have seen no evidence of this on the publicly accessible areas of the Net. Within the newsgroups studied, we find that they have not facilitated the visible formation of cohesive, white racist or racialist groups due to the presence of large-scale opposition within the newsgroups.

With the volume of anti-racist activity in racist newsgroups, it is unlikely that this arena will be a good place to "recruit" new members. It is more likely that Web pages and Web boards are much more important for this purpose, since they present an unhindered racist worldview.

The ability of competent, online, single interest groups to cause disruption in novel and unforeseen ways was an important finding in this study. The "forgerbot" attacks

in these and other newsgroups target specific groups to make it difficult for members to navigate around the messages in the group. Similar acts of ethical disruption and their counterpart acts of cyber-terrorism might be a fruitful area for further study.

In Internet newsgroups, unlike Web sites, those with extreme racist views, although being brought into some contact with each other, have to confront their opponents on a continuous basis. Racist newsgroups have brought together people who would not normally have 'met' online, but also those who would not normally have *'talked'*. Arguments employed by those of the Far Right have evolved over time (Perry 2001) and so it is important to see whether the heated and continuous conflict within these newsgroups results in an accelerated modification of ideology, arguments, tactics and propaganda employed by racist groups and parties? With this in mind, it seems appropriate to suggest regular assessment of these groups to determine whether the formation of new tactics and forms of organisation have any implications for policy. The deliberate moderation in some posters' language and tone, as they attempt to engage participants in other newsgroups, is, perhaps, an area in need of further research. This is particularly important, since an earlier research study, (Whine 2000), also found that the Net was used more for sharing Nazi ideologies than as a means to command and control for off-line race hate activities. Findings suggest, therefore, that at the time of writing, the Internet is most powerful as a propaganda tool - rather than as a means for planning individual racially motivated crimes. This is arguably the most important issue regarding the use of the Internet by Far Right groups. As Bowling (1993) tells us, racism is dynamic and in a state of constant movement and change, rather than static and fixed. In which case, its evolution on the Internet should come as no surprise, and if it evolves over the next few years beyond the findings of this study then that is probably what should be expected. As Ken Pease succinctly puts it (Pease 2001): 'The means whereby people gain advantage over others by force or fraud…change dramatically over time. Innovation changes crime.'

The actions of racists and criminals (organised or not) in meatspace (Sibbitt 1997) are arguably much more important than their activity in cyberspace, yet it may be driven or underpinned by ideology or tactics developed online. However, it could be argued that if individuals are tracked across the Net, by researchers or investigators, without an offence having been committed, their human rights are under threat. This concern needs to be weighed against the potential for serious and devastating crimes - such as those committed by David Copeland the Brick Lane Bomber.

There has been some concern that the Internet does not yet provide a 'hierarchy of sources' - i.e. it seems to place all information sources on a par, thereby creating confusion amongst some of its users as to who is providing the correct information. This absence of authoritative sources has been seen as one of the underlying factors in the success of various Internet facilitated financial frauds – from 'pump & dump' share scams to fake online shops or investments. The presence of the anti-racists in the newsgroups we studied provides a ready and immediate critical response (often with references) to racist propaganda. The presence of critical participants can be also found in other newsgroups, especially medical ones (e.g. the "alt.support.*" hierarchy), where some participants feel they must remain in the group just to counter the claims of their opponents. However, this is generally not true of Web pages where there is rarely any counter argument presented (see for example the BNP's 'Life of Martin Luther King').

Building upon the results of this study, an in-depth assessment should be made of race hate Web pages and chat rooms, with the aim of determining how they are being used by racists to disseminate information, develop ideology, organise, and to what extent they provide a network of support. Investigative research techniques for assessing activity in these arenas will also have to be developed and evaluated.

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