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'Googling' Terrorists: Are Northern Irish Terrorists Visible on Internet Search Engines?

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10.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the analysis suggests that Northern Irish terrorists are not visible on Web search engines when net users employ conventional Internet search techniques. Editors of mass media organisations traditionally have had the ability to decide whether a terrorist atrocity is 'newsworthy,' controlling the 'oxygen' supply that sustains all forms of terrorism. This process, also known as 'gatekeeping,' is often influenced by the norms of social responsibility, or alternatively, with regard to the interests of the advertisers and corporate sponsors that sustain mass media organisations. The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that Internet search engines can also be characterised as 'gatekeepers,' albeit without the ability to shape the content of Websites before it reaches net users. Instead, Internet search engines give priority retrieval to certain Websites within their directory, pointing net users towards these Websites rather than others on the Internet. Net users are more likely to click on links to the more 'visible' Websites on Internet search engine directories, these sites invariably being the highest 'ranked' in response to a particular search query. A number of factors including the design of the Website and the number of links to external sites determine the 'visibility' of a Website on Internet search engines. The study suggests that Northern Irish terrorists and their sympathisers are unlikely to achieve a greater degree of 'visibility' online than they enjoy in the conventional mass media through the perpetration of atrocities. Although these groups may have a greater degree of freedom on the Internet to publicise their ideologies, they are still likely to be speaking to the converted or members of the press. Although it is easier to locate Northern Irish terrorist organisations on Internet search engines by linking in via ideology, ideological description searches, such as 'Irish Republican' and 'Ulster Loyalist,' are more likely to generate links pointing towards the sites of research institutes and independent media organisations than sites sympathetic to Northern Irish terrorist organisations. The chapter argues that Northern Irish terrorists are only visible on search engines if net users select the correct search terms.

10.2 Search Engines: Role in Computer-Mediated Communication

This section presents an analysis of the role of Internet search engines in computer-mediated communication. The ‘cyber-optimist’ model suggests that computer mediated communication (CMC) facilitates forms of ‘communication, interaction and organisation’ that undermine unequal status and power relations (Spears and Lea 1994: 428). In other words, the Internet potentially reduces social context in or around a message transmitted from a sender to a receiver (p. 431). The most likely beneficiaries of the reduction of social context in communication transactions would be the groups who are under-represented in the conventional mass media, namely marginalised sub-state political minorities and developmental nation-states. These actors receive little coverage in the conventional mass media in comparison to advanced industrialised nation-states, such as the United States. The ‘cyber-optimist’ model also suggests that the Internet can provide a degree of ‘organisational coherence’ to political actors who ordinarily are incapable of ‘punching above their weight’ in the international community (Hindman et al. 2003: 29). Theoretically, all sub-state political actors have equal access to the rapid low-cost communication offered by information and communication technologies, allowing them to network with like-minded actors and transmit their common values to a potential global audience. However, the ‘cyber-optimist’ model fails to recognise the critical role played by Internet search engines in the retrieval of information on the Internet. In theory, the Websites of groups and individuals that exist out with the political mainstream should be as accessible as any other page on the Internet (p. 4). Furthermore, Siebert’s four media models [authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and soviet respectively] appear to be incompatible with computer-mediated communication, as all net users are able to choose their own ‘frames’ for the relatively low cost of maintaining a Website. Consequently, the Internet is awash with Webmasters who behave like “primary definers” in the conventional mass media, using their Websites to issue supposedly authoritative statements on contentious issues such as terrorism (Negrine 1994: 127). Yet, sub-state political actors, such as terrorists, many of whom feel marginalised in the conventional mass media, do not achieve a greater degree of recognition or legitimacy simply through maintaining a Website. Although terrorists can manipulate mass media coverage of their atrocities to wage psychological warfare against a target audience, they are unable to compel this audience to visit their Websites. This is because net users invariably use information and communication technologies to pursue their own private purposes (Margolis and Resnick 2000: 96). “Secondary definers,” such as editors that amplify the threat of terrorism in the news media, are unable to direct net users towards the Websites of terrorists and their sympathisers. Instead, net users turn to search engines, such as *Google*, to locate information online that is relevant to their private interests.

Internet search engines can be best characterised as 'digital librarians,' as opposed to the 'gatekeepers' that are employed in the conventional mass media. Internet search engines index Websites, having little or no direct influence on the tone and content of the sites in question. Nevertheless, the order of Websites within a particular search engine directory is comparable to decisions made by editorial staff in the news media. Editors have to deliberate over which stories are worthy of greater coverage in conventional media organs, such as television news bulletins or newspapers. On the one hand, they have to ensure that large numbers of media consumers access their products, particularly when advertising revenues are critical to the sustenance of their respective organisations. Advertisers are only likely to invest in media organisations that provide large numbers of readers or viewers that are able to purchase their products (Negrine 1994: 67). On the other hand, editors have to make the decision to drop news stories, as they have finite resources and space with which to give equal coverage to all events that occur within their jurisdiction. Similarly, Internet search engines are unable to give equal attention to the millions of Websites contained in their respective directories, nor index all of the sites available on the Internet. A recent study suggested that all of the major search engines combined only covered 16% of the total number of 'indexable' Websites on the Internet (Bar-Ilan 1999: 1). Consequently, by virtue of their criteria used to index a Website and their popularity with net users, search engines direct Web traffic towards certain Websites rather than others on the Internet. Net users, whether expert or non-expert, feel comfortable using Internet search engines as navigational 'tools' on the Internet. They rarely know the exact Universal Resource Locator (URL) of a Website, typically entering 'keywords' into Internet search engines to locate information relevant to their area of interest. Recent estimates suggest that as much as 90% of all traffic on the Internet comes directly from Internet search engines (Submit Corner 2004). For example, net users spend a total of 13 million hours per month interacting with the *Google* search engine alone (Ntoulas et al. 2004: 1). Furthermore, net users are unlikely to look beyond the first 25 results generated by a particular search query. This suggests that search engines can influence the choices of net users in terms of which Websites they access in order to pursue their private interests. In sum, the popularity of Internet search engines suggests that the Internet enables new forms of 'mediated interaction,' as opposed to the 'unmediated' interaction that would benefit those who receive minimal coverage in the conventional mass media (Wouters and Gerbec 2003: 4). The creation of a Website will not necessarily lead to greater levels of popular recognition for actors that lack a visible presence in the conventional mass media. Conversely, visibility on Internet search engines appears to be equally as important as visibility in the conventional mass media. The Websites of publicity-starved sub-state actors must consistently appear in the top 25 results generated by search engines, if they are to achieve a high degree of visibility online.

10.3 How Do Search Engines Work?

10.3.1 'Googlearchy'

In this section, the factors that determine whether a Website is 'visible' on Internet search engines will be analysed. Internet search engines do not behave like 'objective, well informed librarians,' each individual search engine instead having a set of protocols determining whether a Website is included in its directory and its position vis-à-vis other indexed Websites (Gerhart 1994: 3). There is little specific information available on these protocols, also known as 'algorithms.' This is because the companies behind Internet search engines are reluctant to disclose information explaining how they rank Websites to their competitors. Internet search engines compete not only to secure the patronage of net users but also to accrue revenue from companies wishing to place advertisements on their sites. *Google* remain the only search engine company to have published details of how they rank Websites in their directory. The original *Google* algorithm 'ranks' a Website in its directory through an assessment of the links pointing towards it, and an assessment of the 'standing' of these linking pages themselves (Thelwall 2001: 3). *Google* equates a link from one Website to another as an endorsement of both sites, attributing an undisclosed value to each Website. (Walker 2002: 3). For a Website to receive a high ranking in the *Google* search engine, it clearly pays to reciprocate links with other Websites, regardless of whether they share similar themes. This phenomenon of 'Googlearchy,' whereby the most heavily linked Websites received the highest ranking in the *Google* directory, would appear to militate against the cyber-optimist conception of the Internet as a political communication device open to all sections of society (Hindman et al. 2003). As small sub-state actors are unlikely to have large numbers of supporters, they are arguably unlikely to reciprocate links with large number of actors online. Therefore, the Websites of these actors are likely to be less 'visible' on search engines than the sites of extensively linked organisations, such as government agencies, research institutes, and independent news media organisations (Gerhart 2004: 22).

10.3.2 Updating Frequencies

Wouters et al. (2004) characterise Internet search engines as the 'clocks' of cyberspace, representing the updating frequency of both the Web and the underlying Internet (p.15). The maintenance of search engine directories reflects the closure of Websites, changes to the search engine algorithms, and the extent to which 'old' pages remain in their databases (p.17). Internet search engines use a combination of automated Website crawlers (or 'spiders') and human editors to index Websites and update their directories. For example, directory search engines, such as *DMOZ* (www.dmoz.org), employ as many as 50,000 human editors to decide whether a

Website should be included in their database and how it should be ranked in comparison to other sites (Search Engine Yearbook 2003). Meanwhile, the majority of commercial Internet search engines use browser like programs, such as 'spiders,' to follow the links from one Website to another, indexing everything that they find. Both human editors and automated Web crawlers look for the same information on Websites before deciding whether, or invariably where, they are to be included within their respective directories. META tags, containing information such as the name of the Webmaster and which 'keywords' best describe the content of the Website, are used to determine whether a site should be indexed by an Internet search engine (Webopedia 2004). In this respect, Meta tags arguably perform a similar function to the 'headlines' deployed by conventional news media organisations to boost public consumption of their products. The Meta tag description is critical in determining how high a Website will be 'ranked' in the results generated by 'keyword' searches on Internet search engines. Meta tags present the content of a Website - in no more than 256 characters - in an effort to attract the attention of both human editors and automated Web crawlers (Softsteel Solutions 2003). As discussed earlier, a high 'ranking' in an Internet search engine directory will in all likelihood lead to a higher degree of visibility for a particular Website. Net users will be more likely to access Websites that are visible on Internet search engines, defined in this chapter as sites that feature in the top 25 results generated in response to a particular search query. However, the visibility of Websites is subject to the constant updating of Internet search engine directories. Internet search engines have to update their databases constantly due to the high turnover of Websites on the Internet, an estimated 80% of Websites available today likely to be inaccessible after one year (Ntoulas et al. 2004: 2). Companies such as *Yahoo*, and even the market leader, *Google*, do not have the resources to index all available Websites on the Internet, or to trawl through these Websites in order to generate a list of results in response to a search query. The implication for marginalised sub-state political actors would appear stark. Failure to achieve a 'high' search engine ranking will inevitably lead to these actors remaining anonymous on the Internet, in effect replicating the paucity of coverage these actors receive in the conventional mass media. Consequently, Webmasters that seek greater visibility online must market their Websites at a target audience that not only includes net users, but also Internet search engines.

10.4 Do Search Engines 'Suppress' Information on the Internet?

This section analyses the proposition that search engines actively 'suppress' information on the Internet. As discussed earlier, search engines are more likely to direct Internet users towards the Websites of extensively linked organisations than marginalised sub-state actors. Some analysts suggest that there may be an alternative explanation for the marginalisation of small sub-state groups on Internet search

engine directories. Internet search engines arguably filter information with reference to many of the norms that inform the behaviour of the conventional mass media. Each of the four media models [the authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and soviet models respectively] permit government censorship of the conventional mass media on the grounds that a story might endanger national security, defame character or offend public 'decency.'¹³⁰ Recent studies suggest that these norms also influence the editorial process within Internet search engines, particularly in the omission of controversial Websites from certain search engine directories. Zittrain and Edelman (2005) compared the availability of white supremacist Websites on the French and German Google sites, *google.de* and *google.fr*. The study concluded that 113 sites, such as 'Stormfront White Pride World Wide' (www.crusader.net), could not be located on both the French and German versions of *Google*, despite being listed on *google.com* (Zittrain and Edelman 2005). Government legislation forced Google to remove these Websites from their French and German portals. In December 2000, the German Supreme Court, the *Bundesgerichtshof*, had ruled that German laws against neo-Nazi propaganda would apply to Websites maintained by both German citizens and foreign nationals (Bodard 2003: 266). There is also some evidence to suggest that sub-state groups may use legal sanctions to remove controversial Websites from Internet search engine directories. In 2002, the Church of Scientology forced *Google* to remove references to Websites that were critical of its religion. The Scientologists lobbied for the removal of these Websites with reference to the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998), as they contained 'copyrighted material' (Zittrain and Edelman 2005). Yet, the norms of the libertarian media model may also contribute to the predominance of 'more of the same' organisational Websites on Internet search engine directories. In the conventional mass media, advertising revenue and private investment are critical to the longevity of media organisations, particularly in the United States. Similarly, Internet search engines maintain their financial self-sufficiency through the sale of advertising space on their respective Web portals. Search engines, such as Geocities, have even sold 'priority retrieval' to companies, placing their Websites first in the results generated by a relevant 'query.' (Noveck 2000: 24). As small sub-state actors are unlikely to be able to afford priority retrieval, they are likely to be less visible on search engines directories than the Websites of extensively linked organisations, such as those of large media companies.

The 'filtering' of information by Internet search engines has implications for those Internet users who wish to research controversial political issues on the Internet. Gerhart (1994) asserts that Internet search engines reward "more of the same" organisational Websites at the expense of less popular content, 'controversy-revealing' Websites only visible in search engine results through a combination of the right search 'query' and offline experience of the relevant subject (p. 22). Internet users who lack background knowledge of a controversial political issue are

¹³⁰See Siebert FS, Peterson T and Schramm W (1963) *Four theories of the Press*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

increasingly likely to turn to Internet search engines for links to sites of interest. As discussed above, Internet search engines are likely to direct these Internet users towards the Websites of extensively linked organisations, many of whom have the capacity to purchase 'priority retrieval.' Therefore, the predominance of 'more of the same' organisations on Internet search engines reduces the 'visibility' of 'controversy revealing' Websites online. If the Internet user is not familiar with the actor behind a controversial Website, they are likely to turn to the most 'visible' Websites on Internet search engines, principally the Website of extensively linked organisations that dominate the first page of results generated by their query. Furthermore, the algorithms of the major commercial search engines arguably perpetuate the marginalisation of 'controversy-revealing' Websites on the Internet. If these Websites do not receive a large number of 'hits' from Internet users who lack relevant background knowledge of their subject, they are likely to remain a minority interest online. Consequently, Webmasters that publish controversial opinions on their Websites are likely to be communicating with Internet users who share their views, as opposed to a potential global audience with no preconception of their particular subject. In sum, search engines filter information with reference to some of the norms of the mass media models. Extensively linked organisations are likely to populate the top 25 results generated by most search queries, often at the expense of 'controversy-revealing' Websites. These organisations are more visible on search engines because a higher volume of Web 'traffic' passes through their Websites, and, in some cases, due to the fact that they have paid companies such as *Geocities* to ensure a high search engine ranking.

10.5 Northern Irish Terrorists and Internet Search Engines

The section assesses whether Internet search engines suppress 'controversy' on the Internet from the perspective of Northern Irish terrorist organisations. The study analysed whether 'more of the same' organisational Websites dominated the search results generated by a variety of Loyalist and Republican keyword searches, using a number of high profile Internet search engines. It was anticipated that sites that expressed support for proscribed Northern Irish terrorist organisations would be vastly under-represented in the top 25 results generated by search queries, further illustrating the robustness of the analysis of 'controversy revealing' Websites presented in this chapter. The study also examined whether the ideology of the terrorist actor was a relevant factor in determining whether search engine results would provide links to Northern Irish terrorists or their sympathisers. Republican terrorist organisations, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), have traditionally enjoyed a higher international profile than Loyalist terrorist organisations, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Irish Republicans have a long established set of international support networks, particularly amongst Irish – Catholic communities in the United States (O'Dochartaigh 2003: 1). Republican terrorists also employ more sophisticated methods of fund-raising and organisational linkage

than their Loyalists counterparts (Silke 1998: 333). Since 1969, Irish-American 'solidarity' groups, such as the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAI), have provided resources for the Republican movement, its members even posing as tourists to transport weaponry to the Provisional IRA (Bowyer Bell 2000: 187). Conversely, Northern Ireland's Loyalist and Unionist communities have been unable to mobilise a similar emigrant population, despite a large number of people with Ulster Protestant ancestry residing in North America (O'Dochartaigh 2003: 1). Instead, groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force have raised funds through 'domestic' activities such as extortion, video piracy, and drug dealing (Silke 1998: 336). Consequently, more 'pro-Republican' Websites were anticipated in the search results generated by Republican keyword searches, than 'pro-Loyalist' sites in the equivalent Loyalist keyword searches. Groups such as NORAI would presumably maintain a Website as part of their strategy to provide support to the Republican movement. The absence of similar Loyalist international support networks would militate against a large number of pro-Loyalist Websites featuring in the top 25 results generated by search engines. Although Republicans would appear more visible than their Loyalist counterparts on search engines, 'more of the same' organisational Websites were expected to dominate the results of the study.

10.6 Methodology

The sample selected for the study consisted of four leading Internet search engines, namely *DMOZ* (www.dmoz.org), *Google* (www.google.co.uk), *MSN* (www.msn.co.uk), and *Yahoo* (www.yahoo.co.uk). The British versions of *Google*, *MSN*, and *Yahoo* were utilised for the study as they included results from their global directories. During the period of data collection, they were the most regularly used Internet search engines across the globe.¹³¹ The three commercial search engines were included to test the rule of 'Googlearchy.' As discussed earlier, search engines such as *Google* rank Websites within its directory in accordance with the volume of Web traffic that passes through each Website. Therefore, the study tested the hypothesis that extensively linked organisations would populate the top 25 results generated by these search engines, as opposed to 'controversy-revealing' Websites, such as those that expressed support for Northern Irish terrorists. The *DMOZ* search engine (www.DMOZ.org) was also included in the study to reflect the new generation of search engines based entirely upon human editorial, rather than automated Web crawlers. Consequently, the *DMOZ* search engine was expected to return more links to sites that could be characterised as either 'pro-Loyalist' or 'pro-Republican' than the other search engines included in the study. Human editors would presumably be less likely to provide links to Websites that had nothing to do with the terrorist organisations under analysis.

¹³¹ Sullivan, D, 'Share of Searches: July 2005' www.searchenginewatch.com/reports/article.php/2156451 (accessed 20 October 2005).

A series of keyword searches were conducted using the four Internet search engines in October 2004. The names of the 14 Northern Irish terrorist organisations, proscribed under anti-terrorist legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1984), were entered into the basic search facility of the four Internet search engines (see Table 10.1). Two ideological descriptions, 'Ulster Loyalist' and 'Irish Republican,' were also entered into the basic search facility of the four search engines. These phrases were selected as they were commonly used to describe the ideological position of Northern Irish terrorist organisations, as illustrated by the names of the 14 proscribed terrorist groups under review. It was anticipated that Webmasters that projected 'pro-Loyalist' or 'pro-Republican' propaganda on the Internet would use these words, or the name of one of the proscribed terrorist organisations, in the Meta tag descriptions of their Websites. The number of links generated by each individual search query was recorded for further analysis. These statistics provided a rudimentary method of comparing the number of sites whose Meta tags resembled Loyalist and Republican keywords. Searches conducted using the two ideological descriptions and two terrorist group names, the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Volunteer Force, were analysed to assess whether Internet search engines produced a majority of links that were broadly in favour of Northern Irish terrorists. The top 25 results of these keyword searches were analysed as they were considered the results that closely mirrored the search terms entered in the respective Internet search engines. The sites that featured in these 25 results were then classified as one of eight categories: Official Terrorist Organisation/ Political Front, Solidarity Website, Personal Webpage/Blog, Research Institute/ University, External News Media, Opposition Website, Government, and Other. During the period of analysis, none of the 14 proscribed Northern Irish terrorist groups maintained an official Web presence under that particular name. Therefore, the category of official Website was designed to include the Websites of Loyalist and Republican political fronts in the study. The term political 'front' is used here to denote a political organisation that either is "directly under the control" or closely linked to a proscribed terrorist organisation (Richards 2001: 72). For instance, the Sinn Fein and Progressive Unionist Party sites were considered 'official' Republican and Loyalist sites with reference to the First Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission (2004). The report stated that senior members of Sinn Fein were in a position to exercise considerable influence on PIRA's major policy decisions. Similarly, the Progressive Unionist Party exercised an appreciable influence on the activities of the Ulster Volunteer Force and Red Hand Commandos.¹³² Websites were categorised as 'solidarity' Websites if they appeared to exist solely to provide support for Loyalist or Republican terrorist groups. This support could take many forms, including soliciting resources for paramilitary prisoners, raising funds for political fronts or issuing propaganda in favour of one of the terrorist groups under analysis.

¹³² Independent Monitoring Commission, First Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission, <http://www.independentmonitoringcommission.org/documents/uploads/ACFA6C2.pdf> (accessed 10 June 2004)

Table 10.1 Northern Irish Terrorist Groups currently proscribed in the United Kingdom

Group	Estimated Strength	Pro/Anti Good Friday Agreement	Website of Politically Linked Group	Unofficial (Solidarity) Website
Continuity Army Council ^a	Under 50 active members.	Anti	Yes (as Republican Sinn Fein)	Yes
Cumann na mBan	No Data Available	No Data Available	No	No
Fianna na hEireann	Unknown	Anti	Yes	No
Irish National Liberation Army	Under 50 active members	Anti	Yes (As Irish Republican Socialist Movement)	Yes
Irish Peoples Liberation Organisation ^b	No Data Available	No Data Available	No	No
Irish Republican Army (aka PIRA)	Several hundred active members	Pro	Yes (As Sinn Fein)	Yes
Loyalist Volunteer Force	50–150 active members, 300 supporters	Anti	No	Yes
Orange Volunteers	20 active members ^c	Anti	No	Yes
Red Hand Commandos	No Data Available	Pro	No	Yes
Red Hand Defenders	Up to 20 active members	Anti	No	No
Saor Eire	No Data Available	No Data Available	No	No
Ulster Defence Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters ^d	Few dozen active members	Pro	Yes (As Ulster Political Research Group)	Yes
Ulster Volunteer Force	Few dozen active members	Pro	Yes (As Progressive Unionist Party)	Yes

^aLinked to Republican Sinn Fein, Continuity IRA, and according to some sources, the Real IRA

^bThe Irish Peoples Liberation Organisation (IPLO) announced its dissolution in October 1992 following an internal feud.

^cSecurity sources believe that Red Hand Defenders and Orange Volunteers are served by same pool of volunteers.

^dThese two organisations are defined as autonomous terrorist organisations on the UK list of proscribed terrorist groups (2005). However, these groups are considered by many sources to be one and the same organisation.

The other six categories incorporated Websites that did not express support for Loyalist or Republican terrorist organisations. Personal Webpages and blogs were defined in the study as sites maintained by individual Internet users to express opinions on a variety of issues, such as terrorism. Although many ‘bloggers’ expressed opinions on Northern Irish terrorists, personal Webpages were not

considered to be 'solidarity' sites dedicated to the groups under analysis. It was anticipated that these sites were set up to record the opinions of their respective authors, rather than just issue propaganda in favour of Northern Irish terrorist organisations. It was expected that 'pro-Loyalist' and 'pro-Republican' Webmasters might use their Websites to criticise the activities of their opponents. Many of these Websites might use words relating to their opponents in their Meta tag descriptions, thus making their sites visible in results generated by searches conducted using the names of the opposition groups. Subsequently, the 'Opposition Website' category was created to incorporate 'Republican' Websites in the analysis of Loyalist keyword searches and vice versa. The next three categories were designed to test the Gerhart hypothesis, namely that 'more of the same' organisational Websites dominate search engine results at the expense of less popular Websites. The sites of research institutes, external mass media organisations and government agencies were all expected to receive high search engine ratings due to the rule of 'Googlearchy.' It was anticipated that research institutes and government agencies, that analysed the Northern Irish conflict, would use keyword Meta tag descriptions on their sites that were similar to the keyword searches used in the study. External news media organisations, who reported on the activities of Northern Irish terrorists in newspaper, radio, and television formats, were expected to replicate this coverage on their Websites. The category of 'Other' was used to describe sites that did not comment specifically on contemporary Northern Irish terrorist organisations. This category included sites that promoted 'cultural' aspects of Loyalism and Republicanism but offered no 'political' analysis of contemporary Northern Irish terrorist organisations. It also included sites that did not explicitly refer to Northern Ireland, but had Meta tags that were similar to the keyword searches used in the study. For example, Websites dedicated to the Irish language, or, alternatively, Orange flute bands were considered 'cultural' rather than political projections of the two traditions in Northern Ireland.

The data was entered into SPSS for Windows and frequency tables were created to provide a breakdown of the top 25 results by Website category. It should be noted that there had been no recorded incidents of government legal intervention to secure the exclusion of Loyalist or Republican Websites from search engine directories. Nevertheless, inferential statistics were not used to analyse the data due to doubts over the suitability of using Internet search engines for creating data sets. It was anticipated that the stability of results could not be guaranteed, as the behaviour of search engines was not transparent, the algorithms behind search engines such as *Google* being shrouded in secrecy (Thelwall 2001: 12). The top 25 results could vary from one day to another due to the updating frequency of each individual search engine, prompted by the high birth and death rates of Websites on the Internet. A second phase of data collection in October 2005 was intended to allow a comparison of the descriptive statistics over a period of a year, but these comparisons were illustrative only and no generalisations could be made based on them.

10.7 Results

10.7.1 *Descriptive Statistics*

The two data sets suggested that a larger number of sites featuring the ideological descriptions 'Irish Republican' than 'Ulster Loyalist' existed on Internet search engine directories (See Table 10.2). As expected, the *DMOZ* search engine produced the fewest number of search results, although they appeared more stable as there was minimal deviation between the two phases of data collection, particularly in the 'Irish Republican' keyword search. The other descriptive statistics appeared to illustrate the problem of stability in using search engines to construct data sets. There were some notable differences in the number of search results returned by the other three search engines. For example, the mean score for the number of results generated by the 'Ulster Loyalist' search rose from 32,611.8 to 216,930.8, between the two phases of data collection.

The descriptive statistics for searches by group name also cast doubt over the stability of results generated by search engines (see Table 10.3).

The *DMOZ* search engine again produced the fewest number of links in response to searches conducted using the names of Northern Irish terrorist groups. Searches conducted using names such as the Continuity Army Council generated no links on the *DMOZ* search engine. Similar to the ideological descriptions, the mean scores across all four-search engines for Republican group names varied greatly between the two phases of data collection. For instance, searches conducted using 'Saor Eire' produced mean scores of 344.75 and 4,681.25 in phases one and two respectively. Searches conducted using Loyalist terrorist group names generated larger number of links than their Republican counterparts (See Table 10.4). The search conducted using 'Orange Volunteers' as its subject received the highest mean score in both phases of data collection. However, searches conducted using Loyalist terrorist group names also showed wide variations between the two periods as data collection. For example, searches conducted using 'Ulster Freedom Fighters' produced mean scores of 8,655.25 and 52,864.75 in the two phases of data collection.

10.7.2 *Analysis of Search Engine Results Using Website Categories*

Irish Republican

The analysis of the type of Websites generated by the ideological descriptions suggested that official Republican organisations, such as the Irish Republican Socialist Movement (www.irsm.org), were more visible than their Loyalist counterparts on Internet search engines. The majority of links generated by the 'Irish

Table 10.2 Number of results generated by words 'Irish Republican' and 'Ulster Loyalist'

Group Name	DMOZ		Google		MSN		Yahoo		Mean	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Irish Republican	50	46	404,000	3,930,000	160,883	384,124	867,000	5,040,000	357,983.32	338,542.5
Ulster Loyalist	20	12	34,200	290,000	13,127	59,711	83,100	518,000	32,611.9	216,930.8

Table 10.3 Number of results for searches conducted using Republican group names

Group Name	DMOZ		Google		MSN		Yahoo		Mean	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Continuity Army Council	0	0	105,000	1,780,000	25,413	188,702	144,000	751,000	68,603.25	679,925.5
Cumann na mBan	0	0	1,860	137	405	3,648	383	2,180	662	1,491.25
Fianna na hEireann	0	0	640	9,600	570	5,434	1,690	18,900	725	6,243.5
Irish National Liberation Army	1	1	59,200	1,430,000	25,696	136,722	146,000	807,000	57,724.25	593,430.75
Irish Peoples Liberation Organisation	0	0	12,900	724,000	8,898	111,000	51,100	35,371	18,224.5	217,592.75
Irish Republican Army	0	16	148,000	2,300,000	66,197	214,159	366,000	2,430,000	145,049.3	1,236,043.75
Saor Eire	0	0	592	13,000	280	4,215	507	1,510	344.75	4,681.25

Table 10.4 Number of results for searches conducted using Loyalist group names.

Group Name	DMOZ		Google		MSN		Yahoo		Mean	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Loyalist Volunteer Force	0	0	13,800	148,000	5,801	29,292	33,400	195,000	13,250.25	93,073
Orange Volunteers	0	4	328,000	5,010,000	154,339	816,841	857,000	4,790,000	334,834.8	2,654,211.3
Red Hand Commandos	0	1	53,100	1,790,000	22,157	130,969	158,000	732,000	58,314.25	663,242.5
Red Hand Defenders	0	1	130,000	1,600,000	71,007	365,944	398,000	2,100,000	149,741.8	1,016,486.25
Ulster Defence Association	0	3	48,700	423,000	9,371	53,011	58,700	307,000	29,192.75	195,753.5
Ulster Freedom Fighters	0	0	7,920	92,300	3,401	17,159	23,300	102,000	8,655.25	52,864.75
Ulster Volunteer Force	4	1	18,200	222,000	7,711	43,526	50,800	241,000	19,178.75	126,631.75

Table 10.5 'Irish Republican' search results by website category

Category	DMOZ (%)		Google (%)		MSN (%)		Yahoo (%)	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Official Republican Organisation	32	24	36	20	16	12	52	32
Republican Solidarity Website	24	32	28	24	24	24	12	44
Personal Webpage/Blog	20	16	4	12	20	0	4	0
Research Institute/University	4	8	20	32	8	20	16	16
External News Media	12	16	4	8	8	16	0	40
Loyalist	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Government	0	0	0	0	4	8	0	0
Other	8	4	8	4	20	20	16	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Republican' search pointed towards 'pro-Republican' Websites (See Table 10.5). There was a high degree of convergence between the four search engines in terms of the results generated by this query. For example, all four of the search engines under analysis provided links pointing towards the Ireland's Own Website (www.irelandsown.net). Furthermore, the majority of sites generated by this search query could be characterised as either 'pro-Republican' or 'more of the same' organisational sites that provided analysis of Republican terrorist groups. A low percentage of links generated by the four search engines pointed towards sites that offered no political analysis of 'The Troubles.' In addition, there were no Loyalist Websites visible in the results generated by the 'Irish Republican' query.

Ulster Loyalist

The majority of links generated by the 'Ulster Loyalist' search pointed towards sites that were supportive of Loyalist terrorist organisations (see Table 10.6). However, official Loyalist organisations were less visible across the four search engines, in comparison to their Republican counterparts. The Progressive Unionist Party Website (www.pup-ni.org.uk) was the only one that was visible on the search engine results generated by this query. In contrast, Loyalist solidarity sites, such as Swansea Loyal (www.swansealoyal.co.uk), featured prominently in the results generated by all of the search engines under analysis. There was a divergence between the 'Ulster Loyalist' and 'Irish Republican' search results in a number of other categories. A larger proportion of the links generated by the Ulster Loyalist search pointed towards sites that bore little relevance to contemporary Northern Irish terrorist organisations, such as Stormfront (www.stormfront.org).¹³³ In addition, the Ulster Loyalist

¹³³Stormfront is a far right group based in the United Kingdom, with loose links to Loyalist terror groups.

Table 10.6 'Ulster loyalist' results by website category

Category	DMOZ (%)		Google (%)		MSN (%)		Yahoo (%)	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Official Loyalist Organisation	5	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
Loyalist Solidarity Website	50	58.3	36	12	48	36	48	36
Personal Webpage/Blog	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0
Research Institute/University	0	0	8	40	8	12	12	16
External News Media	0	0	4	8	12	8	16	8
Republican Government	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	45	41.7	52	32	28	44	24	40
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

search was less likely to generate links pointing towards the Websites of external news media organisations or research institutes.

Irish Republican Army

Searches conducted using the 'Irish Republican Army' query generated fewer links to 'pro-Republican' sites than those conducted using the ideological description, 'Irish Republican' (see Table 10.7). It should be noted that the percentage of 'official' terrorist organisation sites generated by the 'Irish Republican Army' search query was distorted by a very small *DMOZ* sample. As expected, the *DMOZ* search engine returned fewer links than the other Internet search engines, the 'Irish Republican Army' search generating a maximum of 16 links in both phases of data collection. Nevertheless, few links generated by the other search engines pointed towards the Websites of Republican political fronts such as Sinn Fein (www.sinnfein.ie). For example, the *Google* search engine sample did not provide any links to official Republican organisations in both phases of data collection. Republican solidarity sites, such as the Irish Republican Movement (www.members.lycos.co.uk/taaraanois), were slightly more visible in these search results than Republican political fronts. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, the majority of links generated by *DMOZ* did not point towards sites that were 'pro-Republican.' The *DMOZ* search engine was more likely to provide links pointing towards the Websites of external media organisations, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (www.bbc.co.uk), than those of 'pro-Republican' actors. Overall, the majority of links generated by each search engine sample pointed towards the sites of research institutes, or those that offered no political analysis of Northern Irish terrorist groups. For example, the *MSN* search engine directed Internet users towards sites such as

Table 10.7 'Irish Republican Army' results by website category

Category	DMOZ (%)		Google (%)		MSN (%)		Yahoo (%)	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Official Republican Organisation	0	18.75	0	0	8	4	8	8
Republican Solidarity Website	0	12.5	12	8	24	12	12	12
Personal Webpage/Blog	0	0	4	0	12	0	4	0
Research Institute/University	0	56.25	40	68	12	48	28	60
External News Media	0	12.5	0	8	16	8	8	4
Loyalist	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	4
Government	0	0	0	0	0	12	4	0
Other	0	0	44	16	16	16	36	12
Total	N/A	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Anagram Genius (www.anagramgenius.com) in response to this search. Furthermore, Loyalists received greater representation in the results generated by this search, in comparison to the results generated by the 'Irish Republican' search. Both the *MSN* and *Yahoo* search engines pointed Internet users seeking information on the Irish Republican Army towards Loyalist Websites.

Ulster Volunteer Force

Searches conducted using the 'Ulster Volunteer Force' query generated fewer links towards the Websites of Loyalist political fronts than the 'Ulster Loyalist' search (See Table 10.8). Only the *DMOZ* search engine generated a link that pointed towards an official Loyalist organisation, namely the site of the Progressive Unionist Party (www.pup-ni.org.uk). It should be noted that the relatively high percentage of links (25%) pointing towards official Websites on *DMOZ* was mainly due to the small number of Websites (four) generated by this search. However, this search generated a large number of links pointing towards Loyalist solidarity sites, in comparison to the number of Republican solidarity sites generated by the 'Irish Republican Army' search.¹³⁴ Once more, a large percentage of links generated by this search pointed towards sites which offered no political analysis of contemporary Northern Irish terrorism, such as the UVF Regimental Band (www.uvfregimentalband.co.uk). There was some evidence to support the hypothesis that the *DMOZ* engine would generate a larger proportion of links to sites that dealt explicitly with Northern Irish terrorism. As expected, the *DMOZ* search engine generated fewer links than the other search engines under analysis, generating a maximum of four

¹³⁴Please note that this site was no longer available as of October 2005.

Table 10.8 Ulster volunteer force' results by website category

Category	DMOZ (%)		Google (%)		MSN (%)		Yahoo (%)	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Official Loyalist Organisation	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Loyalist Solidarity Website	75	100	16	8	24	24	32	20
Personal Webpage/Blog	0	0	0	4	8	4	12	4
Research Institute/University	0	0	28	56	8	24	16	36
External News Media	0	0	8	12	12	4	8	4
Republican	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Government	0	0	0	0	4	4	0	0
Other	0	0	48	20	44	40	32	32
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

links in response to this query over both periods of data collection. However, the study found that all of the links generated by the *DMOZ* search engine pointed towards either the Websites of Loyalist political fronts or those maintained by their sympathisers.

10.8 Discussion

10.8.1 *Do Search Engines Suppress the Websites of Northern Irish Terrorists?*

Overall, the study provided some evidence to support the hypothesis that 'more of the same' organisational Websites are more visible on Internet search engines than 'controversy-revealing' Websites, such as 'pro-Loyalist' or 'pro-Republican' Websites.' The results generated by searches using terrorist group names would appear to illustrate the rule of Googlearchy. The Websites of extensively linked organisations, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (www.bbc.co.uk), featured prominently in the search results, often at the expense of the Websites of Loyalist and Republican political fronts. Search engines direct Internet users who seek information relating to the two highest profile terrorist organisations in the region – the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Volunteer Force respectively – towards the Websites of universities and media organisations, as opposed to sites that express support for these groups. These 'more of the same' organisations appear more visible on Internet search engines, by virtue of the amount of Web traffic that passes through their Website, and, in some instances, due to their prior purchase of priority retrieval. Furthermore, 'more of the same' organisational Websites are more likely to adhere to a set of informal rules that guarantee a high search engine rating for a Website. Companies such as Softsteel Solutions, who

assist Webmasters who seek a high search engine rating for their Website, recommend that Webmasters implement a number of changes to their sites such as the removal of page redirects and the placement of key information about the site towards the top of the page (Softsteel Solutions 2003). The Webmasters of 'organisational' Websites are likely to possess the resources to hire companies such as Softsteel Solutions to design their sites in order to maximise their search engine rating. Although some Northern Irish terrorist organisations possess the necessary resources to purchase priority retrieval and hire Web consultants, the prospect of government sanctions against search engines that facilitate the activities of terrorists is likely to lead them to offer priority retrieval to actors who have no tangible link to these terrorist organisations. National governments can also pressurise search engines to remove terrorist Websites from their directories altogether, citing a perceived threat to national security as their justification for such censorship. In March 2005, *Google* was forced to remove an advertisement placed by the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas from its search engine following a barrage of criticism from the international media and diplomatic pressure from the US and Israeli governments (Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2005). These factors would appear to militate against official Loyalist and Republican terrorist organisations appearing in the top 25 results of Internet search engine results, particularly in response to searches conducted using the names of proscribed terrorist groups.

Yet, websites that expressed support for Northern Irish terrorists were visible on each of the search engines sampled. All of the searches conducted on the *DMOZ* search engine generated links to 'pro-Loyalist' or 'pro-Republican' Websites. Furthermore, the majority of links generated by the ideological description searches pointed towards sites that expressed support for Northern Irish terrorist organisations, or, alternatively, towards the sites of external agencies that studied 'The Troubles.' This suggests that Websites that support Northern Irish terrorists are visible on search engines if the Internet user enters the correct search terms, and uses a directory based search engine. In the case of the 14 proscribed terrorist organisations, an alternative search strategy may exist to enable Internet users to access the official Websites of these groups. As discussed earlier, the majority of Northern Irish terrorist organisations have developed political fronts, many of whom have established Websites of their own (see Table 10.1). Many of these political fronts, such as Sinn Fein, exert a high degree of influence over the activities of their military wing. Therefore, the Website of a political front arguably equates to the official Web presence of its respective terrorist organisation. As discussed earlier, the study examined the visibility of proscribed terrorist organisations on search engines in response to searches conducted using the names of terrorist groups, assuming that Northern Irish terrorist organisations would maintain websites in their own names. Searches conducted using the names of political fronts, such as the Irish Republican Socialist Movement, the political wing of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), would arguably generate more links to official Loyalist and Republican groups. In sum, the study provided some evidence to support the assertion that search engines suppress controversy-revealing Websites. The most heavily linked

Websites were prominent in the results generated by search engines during the study. However, the study also suggested that Internet users with prior knowledge of these groups could locate official terrorist Websites by altering their search terms. If an Internet user entered the name of a political front into the basic search facility of these search engines, they would be able to locate the official Web presence of a terrorist organisation much faster than using the name of the terrorist organisation itself.

10.8.2 Covert and Overt Web Activism

The study suggests that Northern Irish terrorist organizations and their political affiliates cannot assume that the existence of their Website will lead to greater numbers of people accessing their ideologies. Internet users will have to enter ideological descriptions such as 'Irish Republican' into the search facility of Internet search engines to generate links pointing towards 'pro-Loyalist' or 'pro-Republican' Websites. However, some Northern Irish terrorist organisations might not seek a high search engine rating, or to direct Internet users, with little or no knowledge of their cause, towards their Websites. A higher profile on Internet search engines will inevitably lead to increased scrutiny of the group's covert activities by intelligence agencies and the potential closure of the site by national governments. Weinmann (2004) suggests that terrorists might use the Web for a number of covert purposes such as data mining and providing tutorials on sabotaging computer networks (p.7). Consequently, dissidents on both sides might seek to avoid a higher degree of exposure on Internet search engines. These groups have continued to perpetrate acts of political violence despite the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. Dissident Republican groups, such as the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA, have formed due to Republican discontent at concessions made by Sinn Fein during the negotiations that led to the Agreement. For example, the Real IRA broke away from the Provisional movement in November 1997, claiming that the Sinn Fein leadership had jettisoned a number of core Republican principles by declaring a ceasefire and abandoning the 'armed struggle.' (Institute for Counter-Terrorism 2004) Similarly, nearly all of the Loyalist terrorist organisations that initially supported the Good Friday Agreement have been 'specified' as 'active' terrorist organisations since 1998. Dissident Loyalist factions, such as the Loyalist Volunteer Force, have been responsible for a series of terrorist atrocities in this period, including the murder of *Sunday World* journalist Martin O'Hagan in September 2001.¹³⁵ There is already some evidence to suggest that these groups use information and communication technologies to plan and perpetrate atrocities in the offline world. For example, the Ulster Freedom Fighters have used Websites to select potential targets.

¹³⁵MacDonald H (2005) A boycott that means murder, arson and terror. *The Observer*, 18 September 2005, p.7

In March 2001, a message posted on an 'Ulster Loyalist' Website urged UFF members to attack a named bar where it claimed members of the Irish Republican Army regularly visited.¹³⁶ For groups who use the Web covertly to support their military operations, a high degree of visibility on search engines might prove a hindrance.

Both Loyalist and Republican political fronts use the Web 'overtly' to redefine the roles of their respective terrorist organisations within society. Terrorists and their affiliates choose their own frames on their Websites, invariably making extensive use of the "language of non-violence" in an effort to counter their violent image (Weinmann 2004: 6). The Websites of Loyalist and Republican political fronts demonstrate this overt use of Web as a propaganda tool. Political fronts use the Internet to depict themselves "solely as community activists and political parties," rather than to illuminate their links with those who perpetrate political violence (Reilly 2006: 131). 'Pro-Agreement' political fronts use their Websites in a similar fashion to other political parties, namely for recruitment, fund-raising and increasing organisational coherence. As many of these political fronts participate in local and national elections, a high degree of visibility on Internet search engines might raise the profile of the group, and potentially increase the size of its vote. As such, few of these Websites make direct reference to the activities of their military wings. For example, political violence is only justified retrospectively on the Sinn Fein Website, in a section entitled 'History of the Conflict.'¹³⁷ Anti-Agreement political fronts also use their Websites to portray themselves as "legitimate members of civil society" (p.133). Once more, references to contemporary acts of political violence are conspicuous by their absence on the Websites of these groups. For example, the Website of Tullycarnet Ulster Political Research Group, linked to the Ulster Defence Association, does not define the ideology of the organisation, nor define itself as Loyalist.¹³⁸ As the Ulster Defence Association has links with both the Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Ulster Political Research Group, it is reasonable to speculate that it uses the Web covertly to plan atrocities in the offline world, while simultaneously using other Websites to establish its civil society credentials. Moreover, the Webmasters that maintain these Websites may omit material that contravenes anti-terrorist legislation in their country of origin. For example, the UK Terrorism Act (2000) defines the 'invitation of support' for a proscribed terrorist organisation as a terrorist offence.¹³⁹ Webmasters, who use their sites to incite political violence, or solicit resources on their behalf, could face prosecution under this piece of anti-terrorist legislation. Accordingly, Northern Irish terrorists have no reason to seek low visibility for their official Websites on Internet search engines.

¹³⁶ 'New Internet Terror Fear: Loyalists are Using Web to Pick Targets', Belfast Telegraph. 15 March 2001.

¹³⁷ Sinn Fein, www.sinnfein.ie (accessed 16/05/04).

¹³⁸ Tullycarnet Ulster Political Research Group www.tullycarnetuprg.ionichost.com (accessed 16/05/04)

¹³⁹ UK Home Office (2000) 'UK Terrorism Act' <http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/00011-htm.sch2>. (accessed 10/05/05)

The Websites of their political fronts typically comply with the norms of acceptable behaviour online, as defined in anti-terrorist legislation such as the UK Terrorism Act (2000). The evidence of the study does support the hypothesis that search engines suppress 'controversy-revealing' Websites on the Internet. Extensively linked organisations, such as government agencies, are unlikely to define a Northern Irish terrorist organisation as a bona fide civil society actor, choosing instead to focus upon their military activities. In contrast, Northern Irish political fronts invariably use their Websites to counter this violent image. Therefore, search engines that direct Internet users towards 'more of the same' organisational Websites are in effect suppressing this information. This has implications for terrorist organisations that seek to persuade Internet users that they are committed to democratic principles. The Websites of political fronts are only likely to attract supporters from the offline world, many of whom will already be familiar with the Universal Resource Locator (URL) of their Website.

10.9 Conclusions

The study suggests that search engines suppress information regarding Northern Irish terrorists, directing Internet users towards 'more of the same' organisational Websites rather than 'pro-Loyalist' or 'pro-Republican' Websites. The rule of Googlearchy and the sale of priority retrieval militate against a high search engine ranking for Websites that express support for these terrorists. However, Northern Irish terrorists are 'visible' on search engines if an Internet user employs the correct search terms. The majority of Loyalist and Republican terrorist organisations maintain an official Web presence under the guise of their political fronts. Consequently, an Internet user can access the official Website of a Northern Irish terrorist organisation by entering the name of their respective political front into a search engine. The study also suggested that poor visibility on search engines might have a detrimental impact upon both Loyalist and Republican terrorist organisations. Although terrorists might shun publicity for their covert operations, a high degree of visibility on search engines enables them to target messages at a potential global audience, without the need to resort to political violence. Terrorist - linked political fronts use the Web 'overtly' to portray themselves as members of civil society, often denying their complicity in ongoing paramilitary activity. In addition, the Internet allows groups such as Sinn Fein to establish their democratic credentials in cyberspace, while simultaneously reaching out to potential voters. If a political front is not visible on an Internet search engine, only supporters of the group in the offline world will access their Website. In sum, Northern Irish terrorist organisations are only visible on search engines if an Internet user has background knowledge of the group in question, and is aware that these groups operate via political fronts.

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