INTRODUCTION

The Internet enables Northern Irish terrorists and their supporters to choose their own frames and circumvent the ideological refractions of the conventional mass media. However, this framing may only affect the attitudes of the public if the master frame is publicised heavily and resonates with the values of a large audience. In this chapter, the online audience for Northern Irish terrorists will be discussed with reference to data already available in the public domain, such as Internet usage patterns and the ranking systems used by Internet search engines. Factors such as the number of Internet users who use the Web for political research will be analysed to determine the potential audience available to Northern Irish terrorists. As a majority of Internet users rely upon search engines for information retrieval, visibility on search engine listings is arguably invaluable to political actors who wish to affect public opinion using their online frames. Internet users are more likely to click on links to the websites listed on the first page of results generated by a search query. Factors that influence the ranking of websites such as the sale of priority retrieval to the highest bidder will be analysed to determine their potential impact upon the audience available to Northern Irish terrorists online. The study suggests Northern Irish terrorists are only visible on search engines if Internet users select the correct search terms. This limits the audience for Northern Irish terrorists to those Internet users who have prior knowledge about the links between these organisations and political fronts such as Sinn Fein.

INTERNET USAGE PATTERNS: THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE UNITED STATES

In this section, the potential audience for Northern Irish terrorists will be examined using Internet usage patterns. The analysis presented in this book so far suggests that the Internet provides a space in which dissident Loyalists and Republicans can use their own frames to reject the Good Friday Agreement. For their frames to affect public opinion, groups such as Republican Sinn Fein require a large number of Internet users to access their websites. This is because people access the Internet in a qualitatively different fashion to the conventional mass media. Media ‘literacy’ is arguably a universal good in advanced industrialised nation-states. For example, television is a low-cost public medium available in virtually every household in
advanced industrialised nation-states. Conversely, ICTs require a new form of media literacy, a literacy that comes with experience using information technology (Locke, 1999: 219). Media literacy in Northern Ireland might have an impact upon how the online framing of dissident terrorists is processed by domestic audiences. During the period of data collection the majority of people in Northern Ireland did not have access to the Internet. While almost two-thirds of the adult population read at least one paid for newspaper on a daily basis in 2005, only 48 percent had Internet access at home (see OfCom 2006). Furthermore, only 10 percent of Internet users in the Province had created online content during the same period. Yet, the analysis presented in this book so far has suggested that these websites may be targeted at international audiences rather than the population of Northern Ireland. North America in particular has been a focus of Republican activism as they seek to mobilise Irish-American diaspora communities (see chapter 3). Therefore, global Internet usage patterns may be more pertinent to the debate over the potential online audience available to Northern Irish terrorists.

Digital Divide and Internet Access

In order to explore the potential audience for Northern Irish terrorist websites, one must first determine who has access to the Internet. The digital divide refers to the gap between “those able to benefit from digital technology and those who are not” (International Telecommunication Union, 2007). Clearly, private citizens are more likely to benefit directly from digital technology if they have access to the Internet. People can use the Internet for a variety of activities including shopping, research, political activism, and the pursuit of hobbies and interests. The indications are that Internet consumption is growing rapidly across the globe as more people begin to use the Internet on a regular basis. In September 2009, there were more Internet users (over 738 million) in Asia than in any other continent. This compares to approximately 67 million Internet users in Africa and 57 million in the Middle East during this period (Internet World Statistics, 2009). Europe and in particular North America continue to hold a ‘strong lead in realising digital opportunity’ (International Telecommunication Union, 2007). Despite having only 5.1 percent of the world’s population, North America provides 14.6 percent of the total number of Internet users worldwide. Meanwhile, Internet penetration in Africa remains low with an estimated 6.8 percent of its population having access to the Internet. Although 14.6 percent of the world’s population lives in Africa, it provides only 3.9 percent of the total number of Internet users worldwide (Internet World Statistics, 2009). This First World hegemony is reflected in the predominance of English as the vernacular of cyberspace. This
suggests that so-called ‘fourth-generation rights’ are being denied to developing countries, for whom English is not the common tongue. These rights include the right to information and the right to communicate (Council of Europe, 1997:39). However, Africa has seen a 1329.4 percent growth in Internet consumption between 2000 and 2009, as broadband services become available in countries such as Ghana (Internet World Statistics, 2000). The digital divide between the West (North America and Europe) and Africa would appear to be narrowing.

Yet, the digital divide remains an issue for all nation-states irrespective of their prosperity. Take for example Internet usage patterns in the United States and the United Kingdom during the period of data collection. In the United States, an estimated 27 percent of people had never accessed the Internet in this year (Madden, 2006: 1). This was comparable to research conducted in the United Kingdom shortly afterwards, which found that 36 percent of Britons claimed to have never used the Internet (Shepherd and Bryson, 2007:8). There was also little to differentiate between men and women in terms of their use of the Internet in these countries during this period. The Oxford Internet Survey (2005) found that 63 percent of men and 57 percent of women claimed to have used the Internet (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006: 301). The socio-economic profile of Internet users provides greater insight into the digital divide within advanced industrialised nation-states. For example, only 40 percent of adults in the United States who have less than a high school education claim to use the Internet, compared to 64 percent of adults with a high school education (Madden, 2006: 3). Research from the United Kingdom shows a similar correlation between educational attainment and Internet use during the period of data collection. An estimated 88 percent of people with a degree qualification, or higher, use the Internet in the United Kingdom. The same study suggested that only 22 percent of Britons with no qualifications use the Internet (Shepherd and Bryson, 2007:13).

Annual income and age also influence whether people are likely to use the Internet. The wealthiest households in both countries are more likely to be online than the poorest households. For example, 80 percent of American households with annual income of between $30,000 and $50,000 per year were online in 2005 compared to 53 percent of households with income less than $30,000 (Madden, 2006:3). Internet use also varies significantly across different age groups in both countries. While 88 percent of 18-29 year olds in the United States used the Internet, only 32 percent of those aged over 65 go online (Madden, 2006: 3). A recent study also suggested that 84 percent of people in the United Kingdom aged between 16 and 24 years old use the Internet, in comparison to 15 percent of those aged 65 and over (Shepherd
and Bryson, 2007:12). In sum, it would appear that the online audience for Loyalists and Republicans is likely to come from Europe, North America, and Asia, given their high rates of Internet penetration. With a recent report from the Oxford Internet Institute showing that Internet use has diffused only gradually since 2005, these Internet users are still likely to be educated to at least high school level, wealthy, and aged less than 25 years old. However, it is conceivable that these groups might attract support from Internet users who do not match this profile, depending on what these people search for online.

Internet usage patterns

The target audience for Loyalist and Republicans is likely to be drawn from the United Kingdom and the United States. There have been longstanding links between the Republican movement and Irish-America since the Northern Irish conflict began in the late sixties. Cochrane (2007) suggests that Irish-American groups were a key constituency of support for the Republican movement during the Troubles and played a critical role in the internationalisation of the conflict that facilitated the peace process. While Loyalists have had less success in mobilising support from Northern American communities with Ulster-Scots ancestry, the websites analysed in the previous two chapters suggest that there has been a renewed effort by Loyalists to elicit support from these groups. Internet usage patterns within both nation-states suggest that this online audience may be limited to those Internet users who are familiar with Loyalism and Republicanism in the offline world. This is because people invariably use information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a stimulus for ‘pursuing existing interests’ rather than creating new ones (Selwyn, Gorard, and Furlong, 2005: 13). During the period of data collection, Americans and Britons were most likely to check their email or social networking profile when they used the Internet. One survey found that 92 percent of Internet users in the United Kingdom used the Internet to check their email during this period (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006: 303). The next most common online activity was looking up information about products and services, while 61 percent of respondents reported that they used the Internet to look for information on current affairs (p.303). Only one in five Britons went online to obtain political information, suggesting that the Internet’s potential for enhancing political engagement may remain unfulfilled (p.307).

Moreover, Internet users themselves perceive that the Internet is a means for pursuing their private interests rather than a tool for political engagement. This was illustrated by the share of
online Americans who claim that the Internet had greatly improved the way they pursue their hobbies and interests, rising from 20 percent in 2000 to 33 percent in 2005 (Madden, 2006:2). Some commentators suggest that this is evidence that the Internet may not help generate social capital in liberal democracies as was suggested in the cyberoptimist model. Shah, Kwak and Holbert (2001) assert that recreational uses of the Internet may “erode individual level production of social capital, as these activities are generally asocial or anonymous but foster a sense of social interaction” (p.144). Recent empirical studies have also suggested that the Internet has yet to transform civic engagement as envisaged in the cyberoptimist model. A report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2009) suggests that well-to-do and the well-educated are still more likely than those less well-off to participate in online political activism.iii

Loyalists and Republicans may be able to reach out beyond their grass roots support to young people who use the Internet for research. Young people, who are under-represented in ‘offline’ politics, appear more likely to engage in politics online (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006). Approximately 58 percent of people aged between 16 and 24 used the Internet to find information for their studies during the period of data collection (Madden, 2006: 48). Young people who study the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ may reference online sources, such as the websites of Loyalists and Republican political fronts, in their assignments. Owen (2006) suggests that young people in the United States have a high level of trust in Internet sources and produce political content online that has influenced mainstream media reports (p.35). This suggests that young people who access the websites of Loyalist and Republican may accept their online framing unconditionally. However, only a minority of young people will turn to the Internet for political information or the latest news stories. The Pew Media Consumption survey (2006) suggested that only 25 percent of Americans aged between 18 and 25 went online to follow news stories (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007: 27). The survey respondents were more likely to follow news stories on television or radio rather than the Internet.

Nevertheless, Internet news consumers may be a potential target audience for Loyalist and Republicans. Recent studies suggest that people are increasingly likely to use the Internet for their political news sources. For example, data gathered from two US mid-term elections showed that the Internet news audience had increased from 7 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2006 (Fallows, 2007:1). Yet, Internet news consumers may choose to access the same news
sources they rely upon in the offline world. The Pew Media Consumption Survey (2006) found that 20 percent of people who get political news online use the websites of international news media organisations, with a further 25 percent favouring state and local government websites (Fallows, 2007:6). Nonetheless, the survey did find that 25 percent of Internet news consumers would visit issue-oriented websites for an alternative viewpoint on a breaking news story (p.6). Conceivably, these people might access the websites of ‘primary definers,’ such as Loyalist and Republican political fronts, to follow a news event involving the group in question (Negrine, 1994: 127). This news event would presumably be publicised first in the conventional mass media, prompting people to seek this information in the first place. In other words, Loyalist and Republican websites may attract more Internet news consumers if their subjects receive the ‘oxygen of publicity’ from the conventional mass media. In sum, there does appear to be an online audience for Loyalist and Republicans websites, one that does not consist solely of supporters and sympathetic diaspora communities. This audience may be receptive to the framing of Loyalist and Republican political fronts if they broadly agree with the values on their websites. This suggests that political fronts must maintain websites that are both visible and accessible on the Internet if they wish to reach out to this audience. At the very least, Internet users should be able to see these websites on search engines when looking for information on their respective organisation.

SEARCH ENGINES: ROLE IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The online audience for Northern Irish terrorists may depend upon the visibility of their websites on Internet search engines. In this section, the role of Internet search engines in computer-mediated communication will be discussed. Internet search engines can be best characterised as ‘digital librarians,’ as opposed to the ‘gatekeepers’ that are employed in the conventional mass media. While Internet search engines index websites, they have little or no direct influence on the tone and content of the websites in question. Nevertheless, the order of websites within a particular search engine directory may be 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 products 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. Internet search engines are also unable to give equal attention to the millions of websites contained in their respective directories, nor index all of the websites available on the Internet. One study suggested that all of the major search engines combined only covered 16 percent 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 Internet users, search engines direct web traffic towards certain websites rather than others on the Web.

Internet 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 search engines to locate information relevant to their area of interest. Studies suggest that as much as 90 percent of all traffic on the Web comes directly from search engines (Submit Corner, 2004). For example, Internet users across the globe spend a total of 13 million hours per month interacting with the Google search engine alone (Ntoulas, Cho, and Olson, 2004: 1). Furthermore, Internet users are unlikely to look beyond the first 25 results generated by a particular search query. Similar to the content of newspapers, the most visible items are likely to receive more ‘hits’ than those situated on the third or fourth page of links generated by a search term. This suggests that search engines can influence the choices of Internet users in terms of which websites they access in order to pursue their private interests. Overall, the popularity of search engines suggests that the Internet enables new forms of ‘mediated interaction,’ as opposed to the ‘unmediated’ interaction that might benefit those who receive minimal coverage in the conventional mass media (Wouters and Gerbec, 2003: 4). The multifarious information flows synonymous with the cyberoptimist model must pass through these filters before they reach a potential global audience. 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.

HOW DO SEARCH ENGINES WORK?
Updating Frequencies

In this section, the factors that determine whether a website is ‘visible’ on Internet search engines are analysed. Wouters, Helsten & Leydesdorff (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 have to update their databases constantly due to the high turnover of websites on the Internet, an estimated 80 percent of websites available today likely to be inaccessible after one year (Ntoulas, Cho, and Olson, 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. Internet search engines use a combination of automated website crawlers (or ‘spiders’) and human editors to index websites and update their directories. 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). However, the majority of commercial Internet search engines use browser like programs 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 like 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 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). Consequently, webmasters that seek greater visibility online must market their websites at a target audience that not only includes Internet users but also the browsing programs used by search engines.
Googlearchy vs. Googlocracy

Internet search engines do not behave like ‘objective, well informed librarians’ (Gerhart, 1994: 3). Instead, each individual search engine has its own set of protocols that determine whether a website is included in its directory and its position vis-à-vis other indexed websites. There is little specific information available on these protocols, which are often referred to as ‘algorithms.’ This is because the companies behind Internet search engines are reluctant to disclose information about how they rank websites to their competitors. Internet search engines compete not only to secure the patronage of Internet users but also to accrue revenue from companies wishing to place advertisements on their websites. 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 websites, 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, whereby the most heavily linked websites received the highest ranking in the Google directory, is also known as Googlearchy (Hindman, Tsioutliklis, and Johnson, 2003). It would appear to militate against the cyber-optimist conception of the Internet as a political communication device open to all sections of society. Small sub-state actors are unlikely to reciprocate links with large number of actors online, particularly if they have very few supporters in the offline world.

The Googlearchy model suggests that 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 media outlets (Gerhart, 1994: 22). However, an alternative hypothesis has emerged surrounding the effects of Google’s Pagerank algorithm. Menczer et al (2006) suggest that search engines contribute towards a Googlocracy rather than Googlearchy. Their study found that Google directed Internet users towards websites that they were unlikely to visit through surfing. However, their research suggested that minority websites had a greater chance of being discovered through search engines so long as they were ‘about specific topics that matched the interests of users.’ The research presented in this chapter will consider the impact of search engine algorithms for the visibility of Northern Irish terrorists in cyberspace. It will determine whether people who use search engines are more or less likely to
visit ‘non-establishment’ websites, such as those of solidarity actors or minority political interests.

DO SEARCH ENGINES ‘SUPPRESS’ INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET?

In this section, the proposition that search engines actively ‘suppress’ information on the Internet is analysed. As discussed earlier, search engines are more likely to direct Internet users towards the websites of extensively linked organisations than peripheral sub-state actors. Some analysts suggest that there may be an alternative explanation for ‘controversial’ websites not featuring in the top 25 results generated by Internet search engines. Internet search engines may filter information with reference to many of the norms that inform the behaviour of the conventional mass media. Media models permit government censorship of the conventional mass media because a story might endanger national security, defame character, or offend public ‘decency.’ 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 portals, google.fr, and google.de. The study concluded that 113 websites, 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. The German Supreme Court, the Bundesgerichtshof, ruled in 2000 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 political actors may use legal sanctions to remove controversial websites from Internet search engine directories. The Church of Scientology forced Google to remove references to websites that were critical of its religion in 2002. The Scientologists lobbied for the removal of these websites with reference to the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998). They alleged that the sites contained ‘copyrighted material’ (Zittrain and Edelman, 2005). However, groups that lobby for the removal of websites may be powerless to prohibit its transmission on the Internet, particularly when webmasters are able to register their websites in other nation-states. For example, the Chinese Ministry of Information has forced search engines such as Google to remove politically sensitive material from their
directories. Thus, if an Internet user searches for information about Falun Gong on Google’s Chinese portal (www.google.cn), they will be directed towards government websites rather than websites that express support for the Falun Gong. However, if an Internet user accesses another Google portal, such as google.co.uk, they will be directed towards websites that are maintained by practitioners of these meditation exercises. This suggests that it may be difficult for nation-states to ensure that all ‘harmful’ material is removed from the Web.

Yet, the norms of the libertarian media model may also be contributing to the predominance of ‘more of the same’ organisational websites on Internet search engine directories. Advertising revenue and private investment is critical to the longevity of media organisations, particularly in the United States. Internet search engines also maintain their financial self-sufficiency through the sale of advertising space on their respective web portals. Search engines, like Geocities, have even sold ‘priority retrieval’ to companies, placing their websites first in the results generated by a relevant query. (Noveck, 2000: 24). This is often invisible to Internet users who use these web portals, as both private companies and search engines are reluctant to disclose this information to the public. Small sub-state actors are likely to be less visible on search engine directories if they are unable to afford priority retrieval.

The filtering of information by search engines has implications for those Internet users who wish to research controversial political issues on the Internet. Some commentators suggest that Internet search engines reward ‘more of the same’ organisational websites at the expense of less popular content. Gerhart (1994) asserts that ‘controversy-revealing’ websites are 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 increasingly likely to turn to Internet search engines for links to websites of interest. 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. These websites are likely to be those of media organisations, which dominate the first page of results generated by their query.
The algorithms of the major commercial search engines arguably perpetuate the suppression 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 people who share their views, as opposed to a potential global audience with no preconception of their particular subject. In sum, Internet 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, because they have paid companies like Geocities to ensure a high search engine ranking.

NORTHERN IRISH TERRORISTS AND INTERNET SEARCH ENGINES

In this section, the potential online audience for Northern Irish terrorists will be analysed with reference to the visibility of their websites on search engines. Internet news consumers and young people might be using the Internet to look up information about Northern Irish terrorists, particularly if they are studying the Northern Irish conflict. This study, conducted in 2004 and 2005, examined whether these Internet users would be directed towards the websites of Northern Irish terrorists if they used Internet search engines to locate this information. The online audience available to Republicans was expected to be much larger than that available to Loyalists, as their websites would be more visible to Internet users on search engine directories. Republican terrorists and their supporters would receive a higher search engine ranking than their Loyalist equivalents, as they provide more links on their website and receive more web traffic due to their higher international profile (see chapter 3). In addition, the study tested the hypothesis that ‘more of the same’ organisational websites would dominate the search results generated by a variety of Loyalist and Republican keyword searches. It was anticipated that websites that expressed support for Northern Irish terrorist organisations, such as those analysed in the previous chapter, would be vastly under-represented in the top 25 results generated by related search queries. Media organisations, with their greater volume of Internet traffic and the ability to purchase priority retrieval from search engines, were expected to feature prominently in the results generated by Loyalist and Republican search queries.
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 also the most regularly used Internet search engines across the globe. The three commercial search engines were included to test the rule of ‘Googlearchy.’ The study was designed to test the hypothesis that extensively linked organisations would populate the top 25 results generated by these search engines at the expense of ‘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 websites 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.

RESEARCH DESIGN

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 Appendix 4). 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. It was anticipated that webmasters who 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 websites whose Meta tags resembled Loyalist and Republican keywords.
Searches were conducted using the two ideological descriptions and two terrorist group names, the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Volunteer Force. These groups were selected on the basis that they were two of the most well known terrorist groups in the region. It was anticipated that there would be numerous websites dedicated to these groups on the Web. The search results were then analysed to determine whether the most ‘visible’ websites belonged to organisations that supported Northern Irish terrorists. The top 25 results of these keyword searches were analysed as they were considered the results that most closely resembled the search terms entered in the respective Internet search engines. The websites that featured in these 25 results were then classified as one of eight categories (see Table 4.1). 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 analysed in this book (see chapter 3). For example, the Sinn Fein and Progressive Unionist Party websites were considered ‘official’ Republican and Loyalist websites with reference to the First Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission. The category of ‘solidarity’ websites referred to those websites that existed solely to provide support for Loyalist or Republican terrorist groups (see chapter 4). This support could take many forms including soliciting resources for paramilitary prisoners or issuing propaganda in favour of one of the terrorist groups under analysis.

(Table 4.1 here)

The other six categories incorporated websites that did not express support for Loyalist or Republican terrorist organisations. Personal webpages and blogs were defined as websites maintained by individual Internet users to express opinions on a variety of issues including terrorism. Although many bloggers expressed opinions on Northern Irish terrorists, personal webpages were not considered to be ‘solidarity’ websites dedicated to the terrorist groups under analysis. It was anticipated that these websites were set up to record the opinions of their respective authors rather than to issue propaganda in favour of Northern Irish terrorist organisations. It was expected that ‘pro-Loyalist’ and ‘pro-Republican’ webmasters would use their websites to criticise the activities of their opponents. This was a period in which both Loyalist and Republicans blamed each another for the impasse over the decommissioning of paramilitary weaponry and the failure of the political parties to agree to restore the powersharing institutions at Stormont. Therefore, it was anticipated that many of these websites
might use words relating to their opponents in their Meta tag descriptions, thus making their websites visible in results generated by searches conducted using the names of their rivals. Thus, 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 websites 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 also receive a high ranking due to their Meta tags. They were expected to use keyword Meta tag descriptions on their sites that were similar to the keyword searches used in the study. External news media organisations that report 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 websites that did not comment specifically on contemporary Northern Irish terrorist organisations. This category included websites that promoted cultural aspects of Loyalism and Republicanism but offered no overtly political analysis of contemporary Northern Irish terrorist organisations. It also included websites 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 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. 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 lacked transparency. As discussed in this chapter, the algorithms behind search engines such as Google are invariably 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 upon them.
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The study found that there was more results generated by searches conducted using ‘Irish Republican’ than ‘Ulster Loyalist’ (see Table 4.2). 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 32611.8 to 216930.8, between the two phases of data collection.

(Table 4.2 here)

Searches conducted using terrorist group names also cast doubt over the stability of results generated by search engines. 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 (see Table 4.3). 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 example, searches conducted using ‘Saor Eire’ produced mean scores of 344.75 and 4681.25 in phases one and two respectively.

(Table 4.3 here)

Searches conducted using Loyalist terrorist group names generated a larger number of links than those using Republican names (see Table 4.4). The search conducted using ‘Orange Volunteers’ 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 8655.25 and 52864.75 in the two phases of data collection.
Analysis of search engine results using website categories.

Irish Republican

The analysis of the type of websites generated by the ideological descriptions suggested that Republican political fronts were more visible on search engines compared to their Loyalist counterparts. For example, while the Irish Republican Socialist Party featured prominently in the Republican search engines results, the Ulster Political Research Group was conspicuous by its absence from the Loyalist results. Overall, the majority of links generated by the ‘Irish Republican’ search pointed towards ‘pro-Republican’ websites (see Table 4.5). 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 search engines provided links pointing towards the Ireland’s Own website (www.irelandsown.net). Furthermore, the majority of websites generated by this search query could be characterised as either ‘pro-Republican’ or ‘more of the same’ organisational websites, all of which provided analysis of Republican terrorist groups. A low percentage of links generated by the four search engines pointed towards websites that offered no political analysis of the Northern Irish conflict. 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 websites that were supportive of Loyalist terrorist organisations (see Table 4.6). Loyalist solidarity websites, such as Swansea Loyal (www.swansealoyal.co.uk), featured prominently in the results generated by all four search engines. The study also found that there were no Republican websites visible in the results generated by the ‘Ulster Loyalist’ search query. In addition, a significant number of links pointed towards the websites of actors that appeared to have no direct affiliation with Loyalist terrorists. For example, the personal webpage of Philip Johnston (www.philipjohnston.com) featured prominently in the study, presumably because of one
article he had published on his website that referred to the Northern Irish conflict. Overall, the study suggested that Internet users would be more likely to reach ‘pro-Republican’ websites than ‘pro Loyalist’ websites if they used ideological descriptions as search terms.

(Table 4.6 here)

Terrorist Group Name

Irish Republican Army

Searches conducted using the ‘Irish Republican Army’ search query generated fewer links to ‘pro-Republican’ websites than those conducted using the ideological description, ‘Irish Republican’ (see Table 4.7). However, the percentage of ‘official’ terrorist organisation websites generated by the 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 during both phases of data collection.

(Table 4.7 here)

Republican solidarity websites such as the Irish Republican Movement were slightly more visible in these search results than Republican political fronts. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the majority of links generated by DMOZ did not point towards websites 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 within each search engine sample pointed towards the websites of research institutes, or those that offered no political analysis of Northern Irish terrorist groups. For example, the MSN search engine generated links to websites such as Anagram Genius (www.anagramgenius.com) in response to this search. Furthermore, Loyalists received greater representation on 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 solidarity websites.

Ulster Volunteer Force

Searches conducted using the ‘Ulster Volunteer Force’ query generated fewer links to the websites of Loyalist political fronts than the ‘Ulster Loyalist’ search (see Table 4.8). Only the DMOZ search engine generated a link that pointed towards an official Loyalist organisation, namely the website of the Progressive Unionist Party (www.pup-ni.org.uk). It should be noted that the relatively high percentage of links (25 percent) pointing towards official websites on DMOZ was mainly due to the small number of weblinks (four) generated by this search. However, this search did generate a larger number of links pointing towards Loyalist solidarity websites compared to the number of Republican solidarity websites generated by the ‘Irish Republican Army’ search. Reflecting the wider trend, a large percentage of links generated by this search query pointed towards websites that offered no political analysis of contemporary Northern Irish terrorism, such as the UVF Regimental Band website (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 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 supporters.

(Table 4.8 here)

DISCUSSION

Do search engines limit the audience for Northern Irish terrorists online?

The results of 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. Internet search engines direct Internet users towards the websites of media organisations and universities, as opposed to the websites of Loyalist and Republican political
fronts. These ‘more of the same’ organisations appear to be 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 like Softsteel Solutions recommend that webmasters remove page redirects and place key information about the website towards the top of the page in order to secure a high search engine ranking (Softsteel Solutions, 2003). The webmasters of ‘organisational’ websites are likely to possess the resources to hire companies to design their websites in order to maximise their search engine rating.

The prospect of government sanctions against search engines 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. There is already some evidence to suggest that nation-states are pressurising search engines to remove ‘pro-terrorist’ websites from their directories. 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. The audience for these groups may therefore be limited to those who already were familiar with the Universal Resource Locator (URL) of their official website.

Yet, the evidence presented in this book so far suggests that it may be impossible for nation-states to remove all pro-terrorist content from the Web. Soft power relies upon “the appeal of one’s ideas or culture,” as opposed to the activities of one particular actor (Keohane and Nye, 1998: 86). Diverse groups such as political parties and private individuals may project the ideology of the terrorist actor. As we have seen in this research, the websites of solidarity actors may be used to generate soft power on behalf of a terrorist organisation. These websites comply with the norms of acceptable behaviour online as their webmasters do not encourage acts of terrorism nor provide material support for proscribed paramilitary organisations. In theory, these are all sources of soft power for Loyalist and Republican terrorists that have only limited
access to the conventional media. However, the extent of terrorist soft power still depends upon the attractiveness of their political ideologies, and the accessibility of websites that transmit propaganda in their favour. The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that these actors are likely to be ‘preaching to the converted’ on the Web. Only Internet users who are familiar with these actors in the offline world will use the correct search terms that reveal the location of their websites on Internet search engines. Those users who do not know the correct search terms are likely to be directed towards the websites of media organisations and research institutes.

Have Internet users lost interest in Northern Irish terrorists?

Loyalist and Republican websites may lack visibility on search engines because they receive fewer visitors than the websites of media organisations. The volume of traffic that goes through a website is one of the factors that determine its ranking on search engines. Terrorist atrocities often lead to increased web traffic, as people search for information about the perpetrators online. For example, an estimated 36 million Internet users in the United States went online looking for news in the first two days after the attacks on New York and Washington in September 11\textsuperscript{th} 2001 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2001:3). This temporarily increased the online audience for radical Islamists online, as people used search engines to look for information on what had motivated the perpetrators.

Contextual factors might also explain why people are less inclined to search for information on Northern Irish terrorists online. The political process in Northern Ireland had stagnated during the period of data collection, as the British and Irish governments sought to restore devolution to the province. Nevertheless, paramilitaries on both sides continued to declare publicly their support for the peace process and did not renew their ‘armed struggle’ to achieve their objectives. It could be argued that these groups were not as newsworthy as other ‘active’ international terrorist organisations, such as Al Qaeda, during the study. It is also reasonable to speculate that the number of people using search engines to follow news stories involving Loyalists and Republicans declined during this period. As such, the volume of traffic through Loyalist and Republicans websites would decrease, leading to a lower profile on search engines in comparison to more popular media websites. This suggests that global search patterns, as well as the number of links available on their websites may limit the audience for these groups. Future research should consider how global search patterns influences the visibility of websites
on Internet search engines. This research might utilise innovative research tools that were not available during the study, such as Google Trends (www.google.com/intl/en/trends). Google Trends enables Internet users to view the fastest growing search queries across the globe. This would enable researchers to determine whether terrorist atrocities lead to a rapid increase in the number of search queries about their perpetrators.

Terrorist Framing and search engine visibility

Loyalists and Republicans may not wish to appear visible on search engines when Internet users look for information on their respective terrorist organisations. Many of these groups have pursued their political objectives through their political representatives since the Belfast Agreement (1998). Parties such as Sinn Fein use their websites to differentiate themselves from their terrorist sponsors. The content of political front websites is virtually indistinguishable from the content posted on the websites of constitutional political parties (see chapter 3). Therefore, some Loyalist and Republican organisations are unlikely to maintain a website under the guise of their military organisation, as this would cast doubt upon their long-term commitment to the peace process. These groups might not wish to attract an online audience that is looking for information on their military activities.

Yet, low search engine visibility does not guarantee that Internet users will differentiate political fronts from terrorist organisations. People who look for information on the ‘Troubles’ include not just those who rely upon search engines to direct them towards relevant websites but also those who are familiar with the actors involved in the Northern Irish conflict. Internet users with prior knowledge of Northern Irish terrorists groups will be able to locate their official websites by altering the search terms they use on search engines. Knowledge of the link between political front and terrorist organisation will lead many Internet users to use different search terms than those employed in the study. Conversely, people who rely upon search engines will be directed towards the most visible websites, such as those of media organisations and universities. These Internet users are still likely to be made aware of the links between political fronts and terrorist organisations. The websites of media organisations are likely to provide information on the links between political fronts and their terrorist sponsors, as well as providing links to their websites. This suggests that the online framing of Loyalists and Republicans may have limited effect upon people who use search engines as research tools. Irrespective of their background knowledge, people who use search engines to research the
Northern Irish conflict will be able to view the links between political fronts and their respective terrorist organisations.

Dissident terrorists might not wish people to visit their websites if they have no link to their respective organisations. 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. Weimann (2004) suggests that terrorists might use the Web for a number of covert purposes like 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. Many of these groups have continued to perpetrate acts of political violence since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. Dissident Republican groups, such as the 32 County Sovereignty Movement, use their websites to justify political violence and to make thinly veiled threats against supporters of the Belfast Agreement (see chapter 3). In addition, most of the Loyalist terrorist organisations that initially supported the Good Friday Agreement have been ‘specified’ as ‘active’ terrorist organisations at one point or another since 1998. There is already some evidence to suggest that these groups use ICTs to plan and perpetrate atrocities in the ‘offline’ world. Groups such as the Ulster Freedom Fighters have used the websites of solidarity actors to select potential targets.viii For groups who use the web covertly to support their military operations, a high degree of visibility on search engines might prove a hindrance.

CONCLUSION

The online audience for Loyalists and Republicans consists primarily of Internet users who use the web for political research and supporters of these groups. While there is some evidence to suggest that the digital divide is narrowing, this audience is still likely to be male, middle class, well educated, and situated in Europe or North America. People without links to Northern Irish terrorists may use search engines to locate information about the Northern Irish conflict online. The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that search engines can also be characterised as ‘gatekeepers,’ albeit without the ability to shape the content of websites before it reaches Internet users. Internet search engines direct this audience 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, this might actually benefit groups
who wish audiences to differentiate their political front from the atrocities of their military wings. Internet users, with limited knowledge about the Northern Irish conflict, may accept the framing of pro-Agreement groups such as Sinn Fein if their websites are not visible on these search results. However, media organisations - often the most visible websites on search engine results - may still direct people with limited knowledge about the Northern Irish conflict towards the websites of Loyalist and Republican political fronts. Thus, search engines enable a ‘mediated interaction’ between terrorist-linked groups and a potential global audience online. This may not be to the detriment of a dissident terrorist organisation. Low visibility on search engines may prove beneficial to dissident Republicans who are still engaged in ‘armed struggle,’ such as the 32 County Sovereignty Movement. These groups may not wish to attract a large audience online for fear of compromising future military operations and the security of their members. Overall, the analysis suggests that the online audience for Northern Irish terrorists may fluctuate in response to events in the offline world. As these political fronts have committed to the peace process, they have arguably become less newsworthy. Internet users are more likely to use the Web to follow breaking news stories than look up information on Northern Irish terrorists, many of whom have declared a cessation to their military activities.


2 The relationship between social capital and ICTs will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.


5 Falun Gong, a movement dedicated to a series of meditation exercises, was banned in July 1999 in the People’s Republic of China. An estimated 70 million people in the country are thought to engage in these exercises. The censorship of the movement has been criticised by Western NGOs such as Amnesty International.

6 In February 2007, searches were conducted for information about Falun Gong using Google portals.

Belfast Telegraph. 2001. New Internet Terror Fear: Loyalists are Using Web to Pick Targets. (15 March 2001)