

# RESEARCHING WHITE SUPREMACISTS ONLINE: METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF RESEARCHING HATE 'SPEECH'

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## Abstract

*Researching crime online is a new frontier for criminologists, psychologists and sociologists. This paper explains and describes a virtual ethnographic study of white supremacists using a method best described as covert, invisible, non-participatory observation. The paper explains how difficult ethical issues were addressed in the study and points the way forward for further research in this area.*

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## Introduction

This paper focuses upon the innovative methodology (termed by this author as *covert, invisible, non-participatory observation*), employed by this author to conduct a large-scale empirical study into white supremacy and racial hatred in the publicly accessible area of the Internet known as ‘newsgroups’. Findings from the study, other than those relating to what was learned about online research methods are not provided in this paper, but are available elsewhere (see: Pollock 2006).

Although covert observation as a research method has been commonly employed to examine the behaviour of individuals in a particular social setting, *covert invisible* observation is an original and innovative form of observation research method that can be used to observe subjects in a ‘virtual’ (and *invisible*) setting, such as newsgroups, chat rooms and web forums. This paper is based on an empirical investigation conducted by this author of three Far Right racist Internet newsgroups called *alt.skinheads*, *alt.flame.niggers* and *alt.politics.white-power* in order to investigate two key issues. Firstly, how Far Right white supremacist newsgroups may create an enabling environment for the expression and development of on-line white supremacy and racial hatred and secondly, to understand how newsgroups may be used to facilitate criminal and other harmful activity.

As the investigation represented the first large scale study of its kind, the research method was, previously, largely untested as a research method this paper also discusses some of the methodological issues associated with researching online newsgroups. In particular, the paper argues that by conducting observation research online, we are able to overcome many of the methodological dilemmas that occur during ‘real life’ observation studies (such as ethical considerations associated with covert research). The paper argues also that as the research subjects are unaware they are being studied, it is possible to collect data from those groups that are, usually, hard to reach or from groups (such as the Far Right) that, typically, may not allow outsiders to infiltrate their criminal or deviant worlds.

## Introduction to Newsgroups

Newsgroups, one of the oldest components of the Internet, are publicly accessible, open discussion areas that allow like-minded individuals to coalesce and discuss topics in which they all share a particular interest. To join, potential contributors are required initially to know the name of the group. As newsgroup names are 'subject specific', it is relatively easy to determine the type of discussion that takes place as the title of the newsgroup informs the specific subjects discussed. For example, newsgroups beginning with the prefix *biz.* host conversations about business products and business services, whereas newsgroups with the prefix *comp.* host discussions about computers and software. Internet Service Providers (ISP's) provide newsgroups via news servers<sup>2</sup>, which will contain a list of every newsgroup that a given ISP offers. Users are required to download the newsgroups to their computer before it is possible to subscribe to those to which they wish to contribute. Messages sent to newsgroups are called 'posts'. When a 'post' is clicked upon and 'opened' it is downloaded from the news server and members can then read and reply to any message in the same way as if they are replying to an email. All new 'posts' sent to the newsgroup are stored in the 'inbox' of the newsgroup account for the subscriber to read when the account is logged in to and are highlighted in bold type and listed chronologically according to the date and time they were posted to the newsgroup.

Controlling the content of newsgroups was reasonably straightforward in the early years as the small number of messages meant that a gatekeeper or moderator was able to filter out all unsuitable material (Naughton: 1999). Nevertheless, the user community continually pushed the boundaries of acceptability and some wished to conduct discussions on issues such as sex and drugs. Thus, a new range of 'alternative' groups, with the prefix '*alt.*' was conceived. Arguably, newsgroups were inserted into this category to clearly define their nature and reduce the likelihood of offending the less 'immoral' or more sensitive contributor. Over the years, this *alt.* category of newsgroup has become significantly more precarious regarding the subjects hosted and now includes such titles as *alt.support.boy-lovers*, *alt.flameniggers* and *alt.rape.best-movies*.

All newsgroups facilitate the formation of a cyber-culture, underpinned by the shared commonality, homogeneity, and cohesiveness of the participants who contribute to them. However, whilst most newsgroups are at the extreme end of conformity, and are just about sharing knowledge from anything from knitting to kite-flying, some newsgroups facilitate the formation of a deviant subculture based around a shared repellent common interest such as the dissemination of racist hate speech. The unreality of the world of cyberspace ensures that anybody disseminating such material in newsgroups (and indeed over the Internet in its entirety) can do so anonymously, from a place of safety without fear of identification and apprehension. The non-physical presence of cyberspace might well reduce inhibitions by eradicating any apprehension individuals might have about taking part in their newsgroup. As a result, *unreality* renders them somewhat insensitised to the responsibility that one is usually expected to assume for their actions or words in public. Because it is now mightily difficult to control the material posted to newsgroups, and as it is relatively easy to conceal a contributor's identity, some particular newsgroups have become a 'breeding

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<sup>2</sup> News servers store and distribute newsgroup messages

ground' for material that some people may find harmful, offensive or obscene (such as racist hate speech).

## Hatred in Newsgroups: Investigating White Supremacists Online

Newsgroup investigations remain an under-researched area of criminological enquiry. However, in addition to the exploration conducted by this author, two other important studies of this nature have been conducted; both of which, in part, inspired the investigation upon which this paper is based. Firstly, Mann and Sutton's (1998) investigation into the nature and extent of criminal and deviant activity in newsgroups<sup>3</sup> involved the observation of two newsgroups; one of which comprised satellite hackers hacking encrypted satellite television services, whilst the other comprised members interested in picking locks and understanding more about safes and other security devices. Secondly, Mann, Sutton and Tuffin's (2003) research examines how and why white racist groups use websites and newsgroups to spread their ideological message. Their work considers the extent to which this activity, firstly, facilitates and contributes to an enabling environment in which racially motivated hate crime can flourish in towns and cities and secondly, impacts upon community safety thereby creating new problems for those concerned with the reduction and prevention of crime.

The investigation, on which this paper is based, consisted of two stages. The first stage was to conduct a pilot study of several selected newsgroups that hosted discussions of a racist nature that could be observed over a four-week period to enable the eventual selection of just three for in-depth investigation in the main study (the second stage).

### *The Pilot Study*

The pilot study began shortly after the Easter period of 2003 and lasted for eight weeks. The first step was to subscribe to several selected newsgroups that hosted discussions of a racist nature that could be observed over a four-week period to enable the eventual selection of just three for in-depth analysis in the main study<sup>4</sup>. Only racist newsgroups originating from the US were chosen for analysis in the investigation. Although there are many racist newsgroups that emanate from the UK, these tend to contain racist discourse merely as a subsidiary to their wider topics of political discussion rather than host and be dominated by overt racist postings (Mann, Sutton and Tuffin: 2003). As most racist newsgroups can be found within the 'alt.' category of newsgroups, it seemed sensible to search through the entire list of the 2517 'alt.' newsgroups and record those that seemed, from their title, to host White racist discussions. Eight newsgroups - alt.flame.niggers, alt.niggers, alt.holocaust, alt.revisionism alt.politics.white-power, alt.stormfront, alt.skinheads and alt.politics.nationalism.white - were identified as such. An in-depth preliminary examination of these newsgroups was essential in order to ensure that those chosen for in-depth analysis were reasonably active, likely to reveal a significant amount of rich data, but not liable to contain such copious discussion that it would be

<sup>3</sup> Mann and Sutton were awarded the British Journal of Criminology Prize in 1999 for this online research investigation, which was deemed by the BJC Editorial Board to be the best article published during the academic year 1998/99 that most significantly contributed to the knowledge and understanding of criminology and criminal justice issues.

<sup>4</sup> While the choice of three groups as opposed to, say, 1, 2, or 5 is rather arbitrary, this was thought to be a reasonable compromise that would allow for in-depth study while providing some measure of difference for comparative purposes.

problematic for a lone researcher to analyse. The aim was not to decide upon a specific sample size of 'people' to study within each newsgroup; more important was the level of activity of the newsgroups (which can be ascertained by the number of 'posts' sent to the newsgroup each day), the diversity of subject matter, and the heterogeneity of the conversations. Given the lack of existing research in this area, the investigation commenced with few perceptions regarding the specific data that might be available for collection.

## Research Method

Online observation of this kind can be incorporated into two very dissimilar classifications: explicitly structured and unstructured observation, where the former entails the use of a somewhat rigid observational schedule and the latter does not. Structured observation involves abiding by specific rules that specify what should be looked for, the manner in which the information must be recorded and for how long each participant must be monitored. Unstructured observation does not entail the use of an observation schedule for the purpose of data collection and recording behaviour. Rather, the aim is, in keeping with traditional qualitative research methodology, to record, in as much detail as possible, the behaviour of participants with the aim of developing a narrative account of it.

Due to the under researched nature of online observation studies, online researchers are, at present, unable to draw on much existing data as a guide to establishing the sort of information that may be recovered. Hence, for the newsgroup investigation described in this paper, the author decided to employ a research method that allowed maximum flexibility in order to collect a myriad of potential data. Given that the researcher is 'blind' to most available information at the outset of Internet based research of this kind, such maximum flexibility allows for the collection of as much relevant data as possible, avoiding the risk of neglecting potentially important findings.

For the pilot study, data was collected from 'real time'<sup>5</sup> newsgroup discussion using the news server carried by Microsoft Outlook Express. The newsgroups provided by this ISP were downloaded to the author's computer before the eight groups chosen for observation were subscribed to. The newsgroups were observed for four hours each day for four weeks (excluding weekends) and a range of randomly selected posts and exchanges from each chosen newsgroup were read. In order to identify emerging themes within the conversations taking place within each newsgroup the conversations were saved onto the hard drive of a PC and printed to serve as data transcripts. In total, eighty hours of observational analysis was conducted.

On completing this process, five of the groups were eliminated and three were chosen for in-depth investigation for the main study. Alt.holocaust and alt.stormfront were eliminated because the former newsgroup was found to host general religious and political rhetoric rather than the expected racist or anti-Semitic discourse. Similarly, it was initially thought that the latter newsgroup may be linked to the racist 'Stormfront' organisation and, although a small number of posts hosted conversation directly related to this, the group only received thirty-five posts over a seven-year period from November 1997 to September 2004 and hence was vastly 'un-dynamic'. The type of messages posted to alt.flame.niggers and alt.niggers were so similar that analysing both newsgroups would have resulted in the collection of very similar data. However, as the messages in the former newsgroup appeared to be more racist in tone than the messages posted to the latter. Likewise, alt.nationalism.white and alt.politics.white-power also contained messages that were similar in terms of their content. Both groups contained a combination of political debates and racist discussion but as

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<sup>5</sup> The alternative method of collecting newsgroup data is by using the *Google Archive of Usenet Discussion Groups*. This is explained later in the paper

alt.politics.white-power contained a greater degree of racist discussion, this newsgroup, rather than alt.nationalism.white, was analysed for the main study. Both alt.revisionism and alt.skinheads contained significant anti-Semitic rhetoric, although the latter newsgroup proved to be the more dynamic of the two as it contained many posts from individuals, who were, it seemed, affiliated with the various skinhead movements. Thus, for the main study, data was collected from Alt.politics.white-power, alt.flame.niggers and alt.skinheads.

*The Main Study*

Data was collected from messages posted to each of the three newsgroups between July and September 2003 as information gained from the pilot study suggested that three months would enable the collection of sufficient data. As the data required for the investigation spanned a specific period and would be collected from particularly selected newsgroups, the *Google Archive of Usenet Discussion Groups* was used to collect data from the three newsgroups. The archive contains the entire record and content of Usenet discussion groups dating back to 1981 and contains more than 845,000,000 posts. Importantly for research purposes, it must be stressed that the Google database contains *every* real time message that was ever posted to each newsgroup now archived in the Google database. This method of searching allows users to find specific conversations posted to a specific newsgroup on a specific date. This method also enables users to find messages containing *keywords* by typing words that appear somewhere within a message into a search box (Figure 1):

<b>Group</b>	Return only messages from the <b>group</b>	alt.flame.niggers
<b>Subject</b>	Return only messages where the <b>subject</b> contains	
<b>Author</b>	Return only messages where the <b>author</b> is	
<b>Language</b>	Return messages written in	any language
<b>Message Dates</b>	<input type="radio"/> Return messages posted: anytime	
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Return messages posted between 1 Jul 2003 and 2 Jul 2003	

Figure 1



By simply clicking on the ‘search button’ a list of every message posted to the newsgroup, during a specific time period or relating to a specific ‘key word’, can be displayed (Figure 2).

Date	Thread Subject	Most Recent Poster
30 Sep 2003	<u>Hoht JEWISH b*tches:</u> (38 articles)	Serena Burd
30 Sep 2003	<u>Two standards for US, Korean soldiers</u> (9 articles)	john
30 Sep 2003	<u>Spam from the dog-eating country</u> (33 articles)	Curtis Desjardins
30 Sep 2003	<u>Gold-Toothed Nigger On TV</u> (57 articles)	ExtremeOne

Figure 2

The number of ‘articles’ displayed next to the subject denotes the number of contributors posting messages on that particular subject. When more than one person enters a conversation a ‘thread’ occurs, as displayed in figure 3, which contains six posts in the thread:

Subject: <b>Negro Bitch Leaves 2 Yr Old Child At Home Alone For ...</b> Newsgroup: alt.politics.white-power
<b><u>1 Frosty the Blowman 30 Sep 2003</u></b>   -2 <u>Tom Shelly, Legendary White God</u> 1 Oct 2003    \-3 <u>Randy Jabsco</u> 1 Oct 2003    \-4 <u>Byker</u> 1 Oct 2003    \-5 <u>WORDS@true.org</u> 1 Oct 2003    \-6 <u>William J. Wolfe</u> 1 Oct 2003

Figure 3

*Theme Selection*

The most arduous and complex stage of the research process was to identify the themes that emerged from the conversations in the three newsgroups. There was no easy nor speedy method of doing this and the only way possible was to click on each ‘thread subject’ (refer to Figure 3 for an example of the layout of a ‘thread subject’), and then systematically read every message. The amount of data that could possibly be collected depended largely upon the number of posts sent to each newsgroup. In addition, the number of messages posted often determined the richness of data, as contributors were influenced by the popularity of particular subject matter. Figure 4 illustrates the monthly and the mean number of daily posts received by each newsgroup during the three months of the study.

<b>Number of Posts during period of study</b>			
<b>Month</b>	<b>Newsgroup</b>		
	Alt.skinheads	Alt.flame.niggers	Alt.politics.whitepower
<b>July</b>	167	2787	214
<b>August</b>	107	2775	369
<b>September</b>	84	3244	238
<b>Total</b>	358	8806	821
<b>Mean number of posts per day</b>	4	96	9

Figure 4

As the alt.flame.niggers newsgroup received more posts each month than either alt.skinheads or alt.politics.white-power, this newsgroup was examined first, followed by alt.politics.white-power then, finally, alt.skinheads. Initially, themes were stored under *newsgroup* rather than *theme* heading. In order to do this, an electronic folder was created for each of the three newsgroups studied and each theme was saved in the folder appropriate to the newsgroup and coded under a particular heading. The relevant posts (or conversations) were printed and served as the data transcripts. The posted messages that comprised these themes shaped the central focus of the investigation, which was to develop typologies of the various newsgroup contributors according to three criteria. Firstly, the specific racist ideology, in which the contributor seemed to believe (for example, anti-Semitism); secondly, the particular racial groups they wished to 'victimise' (for example Black people or Jewish people); thirdly, the roles that certain individuals assumed (for example to recruit new contributors to racist newsgroups).

### **Methodological Issues**

Given that the methodology employed in the investigation outlined above was, previously, largely untested as a research method, many methodological issues emerged. The remainder of this paper discusses some of these issues with reference to the investigation conducted by the author and with reference to newsgroup research more generally.

## Validity of findings

Generally, validity deals with, firstly, the extent to which there is an appropriate match between the observations made and the theoretical ideas that develop from them and, secondly, whether findings can be generalised across other similar social settings. The richness of the data that can be obtained from observation studies in newsgroups denotes there is little doubt about an appropriate match between the observations made and the theory then generated. Almost without exception, everything seen by the researcher is authentic. Referring to validity issues of traditional observation research, LeCompte and Goetz (1982) seem to infer that *certain* validity is only possible if the entire scene observed is frozen at every stage of the research and therefore examined subsequently in the same conditions as observed by the previous researchers. The *Google archive of Usenet Discussion Groups* enables the researcher to observe the *exact* scene (including the exact words written by and interactions between the same actors in the same setting) as many times as they wish without the need to freeze the scene. This is usually impossible during offline criminological observation research, unless conducted within self-contained or closed settings using overt or covert video and sound recording equipment. Additionally, newsgroup data can be saved directly from source so once recalled its accuracy is relatively unquestionable. Accuracy can be checked or confirmed by simply finding the appropriate conversation within the specific newsgroup again.

The second issue of validity, the ability to generalise ones findings across other settings, is a more complex area of discussion. As there exist many possible settings for observational research offline, there are, equally, a myriad of newsgroups that could become the setting for online observational research studies. Therefore, the opportunity to formulate definite conclusions regarding the transferability of theories generated from one newsgroup to another may be limited. Certainly, findings can be generalised across other 'racist' newsgroups. For example, the newsgroups alt.politics.white-power and alt.politics.nationalism.white were similar in nature to each other, as were the newsgroups alt.flame.niggers and alt.niggers. Mann and Sutton (1998) also found a definite structure and organisation within the two satellite hacking newsgroups that they studied, as several people in these groups assumed quite definite roles and had quite specific aims. Then, there are the other 90,000 (or more) newsgroups that host hundreds or thousands of different discussion topics; the extent to which the structure, coordination and organisation observed in racist White supremacist newsgroups or the quite different structure and organisation found in satellite hacking newsgroup can be generalised to the 90,000 or so others is yet to be discovered.

Online observation overcomes many of the problems that occur during 'real life' observation studies. For instance, in the 'field' observational researchers must physically record and store their observations in a notebook, or else use video and sound recording equipment with due regard to research ethics. As the human mind is by no means faultless and is certainly prone to forgetfulness, note taking has proved problematic in previous covert research studies. For example, Humphreys (1970), in his study of men who commit impersonal sexual acts with one another in public toilets famously encountered difficulties when seeking somewhere to record his notes. As did Ditton (1977: 5) who, reflecting on his ethnographic study of fiddling and pilferage on the production line of a bread factory, expressed 'I found it impossible to

keep everything that I wanted to remember in my head until the end of the working day...and had nowhere to retire to privately jot things down'. Once the 'field' is vacated, offline researchers often possess only their notes on which to rely during the writing up process. Parker (1974), in the seminal ethnographic work 'View from the Boys', claimed that his memory was so perfect that he had total recall of the conversations he relays in his book. Such memory skills are not only rare but, for some, difficult to believe. Fortunately, online observational research negates the need to devise a perfect note taking or memorising technique.

## **Reliability of findings**

It can be recognised that issues surrounding research reliability focus more academic scrutiny upon the method used than the final conclusion. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested that, in order to verify reliability of ones findings, the dependability and conformability of the research method must have been established

### *Dependability*

The test of dependability assesses the extent to which the research process can be audited. It is important to keep complete notes for each stage of the research process and, as explained previously, each conversation observed in newsgroups analysed was printed and served as a data transcript. These hard copies were then filed thematically in an A4 size lever arch folder. Hence, every data transcript (i.e. the printout of newsgroup postings) can be easily archived and copied. Thus, should there ever be a need to prove the validity of 'first hand' newsgroup 'conversations' they can be examined by guiding critics to the original messages that were saved and printed during the research process or simply handing over the original transcripts for secondary inspection.

### *Conformability*

Conformability denotes that one must have acted in good faith and impartially and ought not to have allowed personal feelings or personal values to influence the research process or findings. Obviously, some research is more susceptible to partiality than others are; such as investigations that may involve one witnessing activities that are immoral or those that involve offensive behaviour, obscenity or indecency. Research concerning the Far Right often involves observations of offensive and insulting racist language or behaviour. However, no matter how abhorrent the racist conversations appeared to be, for the purpose of impartiality during the investigation, it was necessary to remain steadfastly dispassionate towards the content of the messages and unwaveringly dedicated to the research task in hand.

The test of conformability also ensures that one has not 'gone native' and become so immersed in the research setting that one's identity becomes disregarded. Arguably, participatory research augments this susceptibility more than investigations involving non-participatory methods given that the former involves a deeper immersion into the setting. Given that during newsgroup research there is no physical presence 'in the field', and because of the non-participatory nature of the research, there is little risk of 'going native'. Neither is there the possibility that the data may be distorted or erroneous due to the pretence of newsgroup participants as they are unaware that they are being studied during covert invisible non-participatory observation.

### **Access to the Setting**

One of the most problematic, but most important issues, in observational research is gaining access to the setting. Most research methods guides distinguish between settings that are public or private and open or closed; or a mixture thereof. As newsgroups are public and open discussion areas there is no requirement to seek permission to access the research setting, and access to the study environment is reasonably unproblematic as admission to the newsgroup setting usually requires only access to a computer with an Internet connection and an Internet Service Provider with a news server.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues in social research focus upon three main areas: invasion of privacy, informed consent and harm and risk (to the researcher and participant).

### *Invasion of privacy*

The open and public nature of newsgroups also ensures that issues of privacy invasion are also negated. All newsgroup contributors are aware that they should not post messages that they would not like another member of the public to see and that anything posted to the newsgroup can be viewed by anybody else at any time throughout the period it is present in the newsgroup. Hence, all information is disseminated willingly into the public arena is not private and should be regarded as such by a researcher. Further, Mann and Sutton (1998) write that participants of their study were aware of the possibility of being watched anyway by various authorities that were monitoring their actions. Thus, newsgroup investigation overcomes this ethical concern with privacy.

### *Informed consent*

Informed consent is based upon the principle that potential participants should be supplied with as much information as possible to make an informed decision about whether to take part in the study. In covert research, this principle is often transgressed because participants are not aware they are subjects of an investigation, hence are researched whether they like it or not. However, newsgroups, by their very nature, are openly accessible public arenas<sup>6</sup> and there is no requirement to gain informed consent. Therefore, during the newsgroup investigation conducted by this author, none of the research subjects were offered the chance to decide whether they wished to take part. Neither did they receive any advice regarding the use of data nor were they offered the choice to withdraw at any stage during the research process. Although it may appear that the author has overlooked important ethical considerations here, such concerns can in fact, be negated. Given newsgroups are publicly accessible and anyone (including a researcher) is quite entitled to observe newsgroup activity. Moreover, whilst there is a significant difference between merely observing a newsgroup for amusement or pleasure, and with a view to using the data for research purposes without the knowledge of the newsgroup contributors, the ethics of pursuing the latter must remain an issue of moral conscience for the researcher. Suffice to say, only limited research methods, of which the method described in this paper is one, exist that enable the collection of data from groups that are, usually, hard to reach or from groups (such as Far Right racists) that, typically, may not allow outsiders to infiltrate their criminal or deviant worlds. Hence, it is necessary for academic advancement to progress with this type of research technique to build upon and improve upon what has gone before. Of course, one concern is that protocol dictates that should respondents suffer harm because of the research, the investigator is deemed more culpable if informed consent was not granted beforehand.

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<sup>6</sup> This also has implications for issues regarding informed consent, as is explained below.



*Harm and risk*

Careful consideration was given to the issue of harm and risk, both to the author and 'participants', in the investigation. All conversations cited in the published work were anonymised in order to reduce the risk of incrimination or identification. Furthermore, it is only speculation that because the three newsgroups are based in the US, most participants are based in that country too. Hence, an entirely safe place of publication without recriminations from those observed cannot be entirely guaranteed. Due to the anonymity that newsgroups permit, contributors enjoy the freedom to remain secret if they so wish. Hence, many devise online identities; such as that in figure 5, which renders identification difficult if not impossible.

From: Penal Blister (penalNOSPAMblister@hotmail.com)  
Subject: Re: White Sissies Deserve Second Class Citizenship  
newsgroups: alt.politics.white-power  
Date: 2003-06-01 20:06:41 PST

## Figure 5

The next concern involves traceability during the research process. Firstly, as a complete observer, there is no risk of detection posed by merely connecting to the archive of newsgroups studied. However, this issue is more important to consider when observing 'live' (rather than archived) newsgroups, as any participation would be noticed immediately. However, providing one remains a steadfast non-participant, the risk of being traced is minimal.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

Covert, invisible, non-participatory observation research is an innovative and effective research method that can be used to investigate activity in any interactive online forum. Although the research technique might induce ethical criticisms, it is necessary for academic advancement to progress with this type of research technique to build upon and improve upon what has gone before. The modest levels of surveillance in newsgroups, compared to those of websites, may be attributed as a reason for increasing newsgroup usage and, simultaneously, for a potential increase in the levels of harmful, offensive, obscene or illegal activity occurring within them. Organisations such as the Anti Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Centre regularly monitor websites. However, these organisations do not generally monitor newsgroup activity.

Whilst there are figures to measure the number of Internet users worldwide, no similar statistics currently exist to quantify the number of people who specifically access newsgroups or Websites. However, the numbers of people who do so are increasing and there is certainly evidence to suggest that the number of available newsgroups is increasing rapidly and the number of newsgroups that may encourage, promote or facilitate harmful, offensive or illegal activity remains difficult to estimate. Research to date (Mann and Sutton 1998; Mann, Sutton and Tuffin 2003) suggests that certain newsgroups may facilitate the creation of new crime waves or enable people to become involved in new waves of offending. There may also be links between the activities occurring in certain newsgroups and the occurrence of street level violence.

The Computer Crime Research Centre has published extensive research reports into such high-tech crimes as transmitting Internet worms and viruses, phishing scams, hacking, credit card fraud and child pornography. At present, that such problems exist is, largely, the only reliable conclusion that can be drawn from existing research in this area. More research is needed to discover the extent to which the extreme interactivity of newsgroups is being exploited in order to further deviant or criminal activity. Hence, there is considerable potential for using *Invisible, unstructured, non-participatory observation* in the future, as more research is needed into how certain newsgroups may be used to sustain criminal or harmful activity or allow such activity it to proliferate.

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