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## THE UNORGANIZED MILITIA NETWORK

### Conspiracies, Computers, and Community

Matthew Zook

*This article surveys the presence of the Unorganized American Militia movement on computer networks and explores how the Militia movement uses computer networks to build an "imagined network community". The transformation of computer networks from a tool of the academic elite to a mass consumption commodity offers new potential for social organization. This transformation also allows for new conceptions of community and the way relationships based on shared identities are built. This article argues that computer communications can help communities imagine themselves and expand.*

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 brought a little known element of U.S. culture into the spotlight. The Unorganized American Militia movement<sup>1</sup> has been the subject of numerous press, civil rights, and exposé reports, and promises to remain on the front pages for the foreseeable future. Paralleling the rise of the Militia is the maturation of computer mediated communications from a tool of the technical and academic elite to a mass consumption commodity. These computer technologies have allowed locally-based groups and isolated individuals to connect with one another and create a shared identity. This identity, based on the connections mediated by computer communications gives its members a bridge from the local to a networked organization.

While the case of the Militia is interesting for its own sake, it also raises deeper questions for other grassroots movements, communities and society in general. Current conceptions of identity and community are challenged by the formation of new relationships facilitated by the introduction of new communication technologies. This article explores how the Unorganized America Militia movement has utilized the technologies of computer communications, to build an

"imagined network community", that is, a group of like-minded individuals joined by computer networks where the process of identity formation plays as large of a role as the coordination of specific actions. While the Militia movement differs from the concept of "imagined communities" introduced by Anderson (1991) in his study of nationalism, his ideas provide a insightful framework in which to analyze the Militia.

This article provides a survey of how the Unorganized America Militia movement uses Bulletin Board Services, Web Pages, and newsgroup postings to build a networked community. While it is unclear whether the Militia movement will succeed in its organizing, its use of networks suggests ways in which computer-mediated communication can alter the structure of society and the way we imagine it.

### **Brief History of the Unorganized Militia**

Since the 1960s, civil rights and feminist movements have challenged the dominant social and economic systems for regulating race and gender relations. These structural changes were the backdrop against which the constellation of groups making up the Patriot movement emerged. No formal Patriot organizational structure exists. Rather, the movement consists of a network of independent groups scattered throughout the country. These groups include libertarians, religious fundamentalists, Common Law Courts, white-supremacists such as Christian Identity, Posse Comitatus, and Aryan Nations, and the Unorganized Militia (Berlet and Lyons 1995; Cooper 1995b; Dees 1996; Stern 1996). Over 800 Patriot-oriented groups located in all 50 states have been identified, and some estimates place total membership at as many as five million people (Janofsky 1996). The Patriot movement is a grassroots movement which believes that the federal government is becoming increasingly dictatorial with its regulatory power over taxes, guns and land-use. Inherent to this belief structure are the conspiracy theories which accept that an elite establishment controls the federal government and is plotting to implement a New World Order that would strip citizens of their constitutional rights.

The Unorganized Militia is the armed wing of the Patriot movement which traces its origins to the Ruby Ridge confrontation between the FBI and white separatist Randy Weaver in August, 1992. During the standoff, federal agents killed Weaver's wife and son, and a friend of Weaver's killed a government agent. The killings of Weaver's wife and son,

along with the FBI's secretive handling of the shootings, quickly made Ruby Ridge a *cause célèbre* of the danger posed by the federal government. The confrontation at Waco, Texas in 1993 that led to the death of over eighty Branch Davidians was seen as further confirmation by the radical right that the government was a direct threat to civil liberties. The passage of the Brady Gun Control Bill in the summer of 1993 was perceived by the fledgling Unorganized Militia movement as yet another step in the attempt to control citizens' constitutional means of defense against a tyrannical government. (Junas 1995; Ridgeway and Zeskind 1995)

In February 1994, John Trockman founded the Montana Militia (MOM), the first of the unorganized militias. The Militia movement grew quickly and by January 1995, an emergency conference was called by the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment to address the situation of militia groups in the Northwest and the nation (Stern 1995). Three months later, the Oklahoma City bombing took place, and the two main suspects, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, were found to have connections to the Militia movement. More recently, the country has witnessed the standoff between the Freemen and FBI in Jordan, Montana, the arrests of the paramilitary Viper group, and increasing tensions with the Republic of Texas organization. The Militia movement has grown at a phenomenal rate and shows no signs of abating.

### **Description of the Unorganized Militia**

The total number of participants in the Unorganized Militia movement has been estimated at anywhere from 15,000 to 40,000 (Berlet and Lyons 1995). Although the constellation of groups within the Patriot movement is diverse, participating individuals "...all share a few characteristics: they are overwhelmingly white, almost entirely Christian, and predominantly male. And they are bitterly disappointed in what America has become." (Klanwatch 1996). No hard demographic data exists on the Militia's membership but a recent Klanwatch report supports its description of a largely male population with its profiles of 116 prominent Patriots, of which only two are women. A survey conducted for this article of participants in a militia computer newsgroup, misc.activism.militia, supports this gender gap with women consisting eight out of 111 gender-identifiable participants.

It is very difficult to assign an overall philosophy to the Unorganized Militia because of the dispersed nature of the

movement. In fact, there have been serious disagreements within the Militias movement as evidenced by the Montana Freeman's issuance of a common-law arrest warrant for MOM founder, John Trockman (Pitcavage 1996). However, there are certain beliefs shared by all militia groups, as follows:

1. **"Unorganized" Militias are Legal:** This belief is essential for the existence of the Militia movement and not surprisingly is the most vehemently asserted. Militia members base their claim on the Second Amendment to the Constitution, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." and similar language in state constitutions. Although federal courts have consistently ruled that the Second Amendment only addresses government-sponsored militias, the Unorganized Militia argues that this right belongs to individual citizens.
2. **Fear of Globalization and the New World Order.** Examples of this belief are the ideas that the United Nations is engaged in a plot to take over the United States or that hidden agents, cast in the guise of the Federal Reserve, Trilateral Commission, or Zionists, are controlling the world. Militia members point to the existence of foreign troops and weapons on U.S. soil, the current U.S. presence in the former Yugoslavia under U.N. auspices, and the prosecution of U.S. soldiers who refuse to wear U.N. insignias as proof of this conspiracy. This belief also includes concerns such as corporate control of the media and job loss from companies which downsize and move offshore.
3. **Resentment Towards the Current Federal Government.** The government is viewed as out of control and illegitimate for its attempt to regulate firearms, collect taxes and administer land. This belief is largely represented by gun-rights advocates who oppose any restrictions on gun-ownership. Also included are the militant members of the County's Rights movement and the Wise-Use movement who are opposed to the control of land at any level higher than the county.
4. **Reaffirmation of Traditional Values.** This belief encompasses fundamentalism both in regards to the constitution and the Bible. (Maxwell and Tapia 1995) Militia groups often assert that their purpose is to defend

the original meaning of constitution and return to a highly selective interpretation of the ideas expressed by the Founding Fathers, most notably Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry. They assert that current practices by the federal government, such as income tax, are illegal because they were not included in the Constitution. Fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible are also used as sources of direction for the Militia movement and in some cases to support beliefs in white supremacy<sup>2</sup>.

This is by no means comprehensive list of all the beliefs held by various elements of the Militia movement. However, it is indicative of the common strands that connect local militia groups with each other. The exact manner in which these three beliefs are verbalized differs from group to group but there are some widely shared interpretations.

### **Presence on Computer Networks**

One of the key contributing factors to the Unorganized Militia rapid growth has been the use of computer networks to communicate cheaply, quickly, and on a broad scale. Militia members are able to make contact quickly and easily with like-minded individuals to trade information, discuss current conspiracy theories, and organize events (Cooper 1995a). This section examines the Unorganized Militia's use of Bulletin Board Services, World Wide Web homepages, and Usenet newsgroups, and offers a brief analysis of each.

#### *Bulletin Board Services*

A Bulletin Board Service, or BBS, consists of a personal computer, specialized software, a modem, and a phone line. As they are relatively easy to set up and manage, they have been utilized by the Militia movement and the right wing in general for the past ten years. One of the largest militia BBS is the Paul Revere Network, which has 281 locations across the country (Sovereignty Workshop 1996). A typical BBS offers its users electronic mail, on-line conferences, news and information files to download, chat lines, schedules of events, and alerts on pressing issues. Because BBSs are not connected to the Internet, it is easy to control access to them. For example, in order to use a BBS one has to answer a series of questions including name, address, and telephone number. Although it is possible to log in as a first time user with false information, many systems have various levels of security that only allow access to most sections after personal contact has

been made between the new user and the system administrator.

This study conducted a survey of four militia- and patriot-related BBSs to assess materials available on them and purpose. This survey is summary in Table 1 below. The most interesting findings from this summary are the specific nature of each BBS and their accessibility.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Surveyed BBSs<sup>3</sup>*

Name	Purpose
<p><b>Associated Electronic News - Indianapolis, IN</b> <b>Access = Restricted</b></p>	<p>"This board is intended for the use of people who already know that our liberties and the Constitution of the United States of America are in dire peril. We are not here to argue with the ignorant, nor provide 'proof' for the disbelieving. We are a network of doers, not whiners or talkers."</p>
<p><b>Bullet Box<sup>4</sup> - S. Pasadena, CA</b> <b>Access = Open</b></p>	<p>"THE BULLET BOX Bulletin Board is part of SurvNet and PRN Networks, an attempt to bypass the mass media bias against firearms."</p>
<p><b>Sovereignty Workshop - Mission Hills, CA</b> <b>Access = Open</b></p>	<p>"The ONLY focus of this board is to inform Americans about the different classes of Citizenship available in this country....Each class is often treated DIFFERENTLY than one of the others, and each class has different Rights, different tax obligations, and different political standings."</p>
<p><b>76 BBS - North Carolina</b> <b>Access = Restricted</b></p>	<p>"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; But he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man[sic] and women... For the Restoration of the Republic!"</p>

They are not designed for people who are simply "surfing". They have a specific audience that they are intending to reach, and which they make clear immediately upon logging in. There are major differences between BBSs that grant full access upon the first call and those which have different layers of security. Those offering open access, Bullet Box and Sovereignty Workshop, are interested in distributing information. Those requiring security checks, Associated Electronic News and 76BBS, present themselves as "doers" interested in militia organizing. The two "doer" BBSs also provided opportunities for security-cleared users to access and exchange information on local militia events and meetings.

This brief survey is useful in highlighting the fact that major players within the Militia movement such as Linda Thompson<sup>5</sup> rely on BBSs as a vehicle of communication that can be both widely distributed and restricted. This serves both to make the militia's message accessible while reinforcing the sense of belonging to militia community, e.g., the need to obtain a security clearance. Furthermore, due to the specificity of their content and purpose, BBSs serve to concentrate and reinforced the beliefs of the Militia movement. Those inclined to believe and join a militia unit will find nothing but confirmation of their fears and prejudices.

### *World Wide Web - General*

The World Wide Web<sup>6</sup> has grown in the past four years from nothing to the fastest growing segment of the Internet with over 10 million users (CommerceNet/Nielsen 1995). Its ease of use and the ability to download text, graphics, pictures, sounds, and video clips with the click of a mouse has brought a surge of new users to the Internet. Among these new users are the Unorganized Militia and Patriot movements, which currently have dozens of sites. The research for this article consisted of an initial keyword search for Unorganized Militia web sites which produced numerous "hits". These web pages often contained links to other Militia-related and right-wing sites. This article surveyed 21 web pages that were judged to be representing a specific militia group rather than a single individual or Patriot conspiracy information provider. These sites were then evaluated according to popularity, technical sophistication, and self described purpose and membership.

Because the World Wide Web allows anyone to present themselves as anyone or anything, it is difficult to determine



which Web pages are representative of larger groups and which are the work of individuals with aspirations of grandeur. However, it is possible to make cautious judgments of the importance of a page based on its popularity and sophistication. Some web pages have a "counter" attached to them that measures the number of times a page is accessed. This is useful to give a sense of the popularity of a site, although it does not differentiate between an idle curiosity seeker and someone searching for militia news or commentary. Moreover, these numbers must be accessed carefully as they can be artificially inflated by the owner of the page to convey a sense of vitality to a site.

The sophistication of a site represents the amount of time that people are willing to devote to an issue and can serve as a proxy, with extreme reservations, of the dedication shown by the webmaster of the site. This information for the twenty-one sites surveyed is contained in Table 2 below.

As Table 2 indicates, there is a sizable presence of the Unorganized Militia on the Web, and the sites are growing quickly in number and sophistication. Ten of the sites appeared in the nine-month interval between the two surveys, and these newer sites were overall more technically sophisticated than the older sites. The sites also ran the gamut in geographical specificity from catering to the nation or a region, such as the **US Militia** and the **Regiment of Dragoons** sites, to being county specific like the **Stark County, Ohio** site.

In terms of content, the militia pages were in complete unanimity on the need to defend the Constitution against the New World Order. Many pages made this topic their primary focus both in their own writings and in the links to supporting materials. There is greater difference among the pages in regards to traditional values. Among the eleven sites surveyed in April, fundamental Christianity is present and emphasized at two sites, five sites make overtures to all religions, and four sites make no mention of the subject. In regard to racism, seven pages make anti-racist statements, four make no mention of race and none contain overt racist overtures. Finally, in the issue of gender, two take anti-sexist stands, two state welcomes to women, and the other seven are silent on the matter.

Clearly what gets presented on web pages could just be window-dressing but it is significant that some militia web pages, which are also a means of contacting new members,

make the stands that they do. The next section takes a more in-depth look at the two most popular militia web pages, Montana and Michigan, to analyze the representation of the militia on the Web.

**Table 2**

*Popularity and Sophistication of Web Pages*

Name	April 19, 1996 Survey		January 10, 1997 Survey	
	Number of Hits	Sophistication of Site <sup>7</sup>	Number of Hits	Sophistication of Site
E Pluribus Unum (Ohio)	4,510	4	no counter	4
Michigan (Kent County)	14,207	3	41,203	3
Michigan (Silent Running)	no counter	2	not up	-
Montana	8,111	2	23,865	2
Montana - Catalog	no counter	1	no counter	1
North Carolina	262	1	no counter	1
Stark County, Ohio	155	2	2,663	2
South Carolina	no counter	1	no counter	2
Tennessee	no counter	1	no counter	1
Vigo County, Indiana	no counter	1	not up	-
Virginia	737	1	no counter	1
American Computer Militia	n/a <sup>8</sup>	n/a	no counter	2
Central Ohio Unorganized Militia	n/a	n/a	no counter	2
Constitutional Militia of Southern California	n/a	n/a	no counter	2
Lee County, Florida Militia	n/a	n/a	1,754	3
Missouri Militia, 51st	n/a	n/a	4,991	2
Missouri Militia, 52nd	n/a	n/a	no counter	4
Pennsylvania Patriot Resource Center	n/a	n/a	no counter	1
Regiment of Dragoons (New England)	n/a	n/a	978	2
South Carolina Citizen Militia	n/a	n/a	no counter	1
US Militia	n/a	n/a	14,679	2

*World Wide Web - Montana Militia*

The Montana Militia is represented by two web pages, one providing a mission statement and news and the other solely dedicated to selling militia related merchandise, such as books, tape, and survival gear. It is unclear whether these pages are the "official" web pages for the Montana Militia or if they have been set up autonomously by individual members of the movement. It appears that this page's primary purpose is conceived as announcing the Montana Militia as a group fighting against New World Order conspiracies.

The opening lines of the mission statement describes the Montana Militia as "...an educational organization dedicated to the preservation of the freedoms of all citizens..." The page continues with quotes and references to the founding fathers of the United States, particularly Thomas Jefferson, and makes strong assertions about the current dangers facing the United States. "The Conspirators to form a SOCIALIST ONE WORLD GOVERNMENT under the UNITED NATIONS are still at work treasonously [sic] subverting the Constitution in order to enslave the Citizens of the State of Montana, The United States of America and the World in a socialist union."

Following up this assertion of conspiracy is both a solution to the problem and a justification for the existence of the Montana Militia. "The best defense against the usurpation of these freedoms by the tyranny of a run-away, out of control government is a well informed and well prepared Unorganized Militia ..." The page offers contact information and analyses on the standoff between the FBI and the Freemen in Jordan, Montana. Interestingly, the contact information provided for the militia is for postal and phone service rather than electronic mail.

No links to other militia groups, not even the Montana Militia merchandise site, are offered and this page provides little documentation to back up the assertions that were made in the page. Although there is a link to a Justice Department report on Ruby Ridge the only way to obtain further information and "proof" of the NWO conspiracy is by contacting the Montana militia via phone or mail. Therefore, the popularity of this page cannot be easily explained by the resources and information available there. It may simply be a result of the Montana Militia's ability to garner a great deal of media attention that leads people to visit this site.

*World Wide Web - Michigan Militia*

The Michigan Militia web site is the most popular Unorganized Militia site surveyed by this study and offers substantial information about itself and many links to other sites. In contrast to the strongly ideological polemic offered at the Montana militia page, the Michigan militia page describes itself in the following way.

"The militia is more accurately called a guarantor of a peaceful society. The militia is strictly a DEFENSIVE organization. Our function is to preserve and defend the Constitution of the United States of America and the State of Michigan as well as the citizenry at large."

The Michigan page contains links to documents and other sites that manifest the same conspiracy beliefs voiced by the Montana page but in its official description of itself, the it uses the words defensive and peaceful.

The Michigan page offers extensive contact information for its organization through a map of Michigan that shows the organizational structure of the militia and includes phone numbers for unit commanders for every county in the state. A bi-weekly newsletter is also available on line and via electronic mail. In addition to its self-promotion evident in the rhetoric of defense, the Michigan page also offers resources for the militia user who visits it. Michigan-specific contacts and nationally-oriented resources are both available. Reflective of this resource base is the fact that links to the Michigan Militia page are popular on other Militia and Patriot web pages.

*World Wide Web - Conclusion*

This survey presents a snapshot of the growing Militia movement presence on the World Wide Web. Each site is put to various uses but the common thread appears to be using these pages as both contact points and information depots about the New World Order Conspiracy. All the sites recognize the potential of Web pages to act as recruiting tools to attract new members to the movement. The survey also highlights the differences among Militia movement groups as evidenced by the "militant" stand of the Montana Militia page and the "defensive" stand of the Michigan page. Although these pages provide an exponentially increasing number of stances and opinions, they are all united by rage against the U.S.

government and the belief that someone is stacking the deck against them.

## **MILITIA DISCOURSE ON THE INTERNET**

Both Bulletin Board Services and Web pages are useful tools in providing information for and about the Militia movement. However, these examples are largely one-way conduits of information with limited feedback opportunities through email. Horizontal discourse among members of the Unorganized Militia is possible on computer networks through a newsgroup format which allows for individuals to post and respond to other people's opinions. Through this process a dialogue is constructed and issues debated. Militia newsgroups are available both on BBSs and the Internet. Because BBSs restrict access to their newsgroup this study used the Usenet group misc.activism.militia (MAM<sup>9</sup>) which was established in February of 1995 and is generally available throughout the Internet.

MAMs mission was defined as providing "an environment for the coordination of the militia movement throughout the world, with political information, propaganda and important news" (Chapman 1995). It is a very active group with often over one hundred postings<sup>10</sup> a day from many different participants. The discourse present on MAM will be interpreted as defining a sphere of acceptability in which Usenet militia discourse can take place rather than being completely representative of all the participants. Each individual poster is designated as a numbered voice although the numbers do not always reflect the order in which the postings took place. This examination is divided into three sections that encompass a large part of the discussion during March and April of 1996. The sections include: 1) Motivations for participating in the Militia movement, 2) Organization of the Militia, and 3) The April 19th Anniversary of the Waco Fire and Oklahoma Bombing.

### *Motivations Behind Participation*

The motivations to participate in a movement are an integral part of its self-definition. Reasons for participation in the Militia movement have been indicated in the section on Unorganized Militia beliefs and reappears again and again on MAM. Some of the most interesting series of exchanges result from inflammatory postings to the group that bring a mixture of heated and measured reactions. For example, one particular posting castigated the entire Militia movement as the lunatic fringe.

*voice 1: "This whole militia phenomenon is morbidly[sic] fascinating. Here are ...many groups of individuals who for that lack of another enemy they have chosen to make the American govt. their enemey [sic] of choice.."*

*voice 2: "You have a lot to learn about the motivations behind the phenomenon. There are many reasons why people have formed into militias, including:*

- \* excessive use of force by law enforcement*
- \* passage and attempted passage of laws violating civil rights*
- \* attempts at the federal level to restrict firearms ownership*
- \* protesting excessive taxes*
- \* designating private property as federally controlled, without compensation Just to name a few."*

*voice 3: "To be honest, I am scared. I don't want the US to become a police state. I want to enjoy my freedoms...At our current pace, I honestly do not think that my children or their children will enjoy such freedoms if we do not do something NOW."*

The first posting brought numerous responses including a laundry list detailing a federal government out of control and an open confession of fear for the future. The provocateur also decided to affront the readers of MAM with a comparison between them and the Freemen of Jordan, Montana.

*voice 1: "...on close inspection, the differences among the militialoons are minor. The Freemen sound exactly like the people who inhabit misc.activism.militias. They talk about the same things: ...They espouse bizarre racist views ..."*

*voice 3: "You are responding to the wrong elements of the Patriot or militia movement. In every ideological movement, divisions occur. ...As patriots, we must admit that some "less acceptable" or misguided elements exist within the movement... Perhaps, by simply acknowledging that these elements exist within the movement, but that their views are not widely supported,...we can minimize the damage that these elements cause to the larger movement."*

The second responder took this opportunity to distance himself and the Militia movement in general from the

"misguided" Freemen. He acknowledges that such elements are contained within the militia but clearly feels that these are minority within the movement. Judging from the postings that preceded this, these posters are arguing that distrust of the government and global forces, largely account for their participation in the Militia movement.

### *Organizational Issues*

Another topic that is often discussed on the MAM newsgroup revolves around the issue of organizing the Militia movement. As the following discourse illustrates a big question is whether misc.activism.militia is a useful forum for this effort and how computer networks can be used to further these goals.

*voice 4: "We have no National Organization [sic], because nobody really trusts anyone else. Half the people who read this group don't post here, and a chunk of those who do don't sign their names, cause the Big Bad Boogey Gov't might take them away."*

*voice 5: "Absolutely. There's also the simple fact that while militias might be able to arm themselves and secure local areas, with a lack of organization and particularly in the absence of information-sharing, or reliable reporting from other areas, they're isolated and can be very easily manipulated by any of a number of opposing camps."*

*voice 6: "I agree with that 100%. But then we must realize that this is not a forum for the real thing. This is a debating place for each side. If I were going to try to organize a real resistance to those who are taking away our bill of rights, I sure wouldn't do it here."*

Although voice 4 decries the lack of participation from the readers of this newsgroup and voice 5 points to the value of a national organization, voice 6 brings the discussion back to reality. Organization of the Militia movement is utilizing computer networks but this newsgroup is too uncontrolled of a forum to be use by a real resistance movement. General discussion about militia beliefs and conspiracies theories can take place and help to build the network identity of the Militia movement but real organizing takes place elsewhere.

### *Anniversary of April 19th*

April 19th has acquired a great deal of symbolism for the Unorganized Militia movement because it is the anniversary of

both the finale of the Waco confrontation and the Oklahoma City bombing. Therefore, during the time that this research was conducted there was a great deal of discussion in the MAM newsgroup on how best to recognize the day.

*voice 7: "April 19th is a day of tragedy for all patriotic Americans. First, we have the Feds murdering innocent children and then we have a nut killing more children in the name of those kids in Waco ...Let's march on Washington, arms in hand to show that though we detest federal limits on our rights and that we are willing to fight to defend ourselves and the rights granted to us by God and the constitution"*

*voice 8: "March on Washington? With arms?.....Sounds like someone is still marching to the beat of a different drummer (Linda Thompson)...This is so desperately foolish. This is exactly the sort of thing that would convince the general public, that those with militia affiliations, patriots, and firearms owners, are loonies."*

As this exchange illustrates there was ample disagreement within MAM between more militant members of the Militia movement and those who interested in presenting themselves as rational individuals to the public. This type of exchange was consistent with many of the postings around the subject. However, most could agree on Waco as a symbol for the excesses of the government, and the need for patriots to defend themselves was one of the strongest recurring themes in this thread of discussion.

*voice 9: "It is our job to redefine the event. It was not mass suicide. It was not an accident. It was not a bungled tank job. The FBI and ATF pumped hatred for the Davidians into America from Day One. When public opinion was where the government wanted it, the Davidians were exterminated."*

*voice 10: "April 19, 1996 marks the beginning of escalation of the Patriots' war against the New World Order's incursion into the good ol' U.S. of A. ...Let us lay aside the temporary differences that have heretofore separated the diverse groups in this grass-roots movement. Unity must be achieved SOON or we'll all be annihilated by the encroaching monster called the NEW WORLD ORDER."*

The discourse focused primarily on the Waco event and when the issue of the Oklahoma City bombing was raised it became contested ground between "Reichstag" theorists and



those acknowledging the connection to the Patriot movement. Furthermore, because of the Freeman standoff at the time of these postings many conversations dealt with the possibility of yet more martyrs for the movement.

### *Conclusion*

This presentation of militia discourse on the Internet does not claim that it is representational of the entirety of computer-mediated militia communications. The newsgroup misc.activism.militia is a publicly available forum which anyone can read and which does not provide a secure private environment. BBSs provide more tightly controlled forums for discussions and electronic mail lists, equipped with encryption technology, offer even more secrecy. Given the seditious beliefs held by militia members there is little doubt that a large portion of militia discourse, particularly of a more extreme and illegal nature, takes place at an inaccessible level.

Recognizing these limitations, it is possible to make some conclusions on the content of militia discourse on the Internet. First, the conception of the federal government out of control seems to be a widely shared belief that is reinforced by postings providing examples of abuse, voicing concerns of future oppression, and simply agreeing with other people's fears. Second, confrontations between militia groups and the government are widely interpreted as confirmations of the conspiracy beliefs held by militia members. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the Militia movement is not a uniform movement with a centralized ideology. Rather, it is a constellation of ideologies that share some common beliefs but challenge the validity of other stances within the larger militia framework. The discourse of the newsgroup is an important forum where militia members can debate which aspects of these ideologies are a legitimate part of the militia identity.

### **A NETWORK MILITIA MOVEMENT?**

This study offers an empirical examination of the role that computer networks have played in the growth of the Militia moment during the past three years. An intriguing question is whether this analysis leads to the conclusion that there is a network aspect to the Militia, that is a movement where computer-space constitutes an arena for organizing and interaction. Computer networks strengthen the movement in five important ways.

**1. Acting as an alternative information source:** Computer networks allowed the Militia movement to bypass the existing mainstream means of communications to create an alternative information source. BBSs, Web Pages, and email lists offer presentations of current events that interpret news through the lens of militia conspiracy theories. Although alternative presses have existed historically, computer networks greatly increase the speed and scope in which this information can be disseminated.

**2. Equalizing legitimacy:** The nature of the Internet and Web disconnects information from a traditionally recognizable source and provides a sense of equal legitimacy for all materials. Addresses for Web sites do not correspond to an established system of validation and a site may portray itself as something that it is not<sup>11</sup>. A well designed and technically sophisticated Web site can create a aura of reliability and representation when in reality it may simply be the work of one individual. This equalizing effect has been important for the Militia movement by providing people with verification for conspiracy theories from "authorities" located in cyberspace.

**3. Creating greater access to the mainstream:** Militia information is far more accessible to mainstream readers via computer networks than has previously been the case. Readers still need to voluntarily seek out information related to the Patriot movement but searches using Web search engines can lead users to militia sites even when they are not specifically requested. For example, a search conducted on gun control or abortion will produce many possible sites to visit, some of which contain links to sites related to the Militia movement. Because of links between Web pages it is relatively easy to progress from a site dedicated strictly to gun control to a document on Second Amendment rights to justifications for the legality of Unorganized Militias to explanations of militia conspiracy theories. The initial search may be on a relatively mainstream topic but individuals with militia-like sentiments can acquire information about the movement with an ease that simply was not possible earlier.

**4. Reducing isolation:** This easy access to militia conspiracies theories and discourse reduces the isolation that scattered individuals and groups may encounter in their own community. Rather than feeling like one group against the nation it is possible for the local organization to picture itself as part of a larger community that shares its beliefs. This also can

serve to explain and reinforce the fears of people who would otherwise remain isolated from any larger movement.

**5. Communicating between de-centralized groups and individuals:** Finally, computer networks offer an ideal form of communication for a movement that is widely dispersed and has no centralized organization. The fast communication offered by the Internet is ideal for spreading news and creating links between local Patriot and Militia organizations. Issues can be debated, new allied groups can be formed, and strategies charted independently from centralized structures. At the same time groups are able to remain aware of the directions in which the movement is moving.

### *The Imagined Network Militia Community*

The combination of these five effects of computer networks have helped the Unorganized Militia movement imagine a community that links local groups and individuals to a larger networked group. The concept of an imagined community borrows from the work of Benedict Anderson and his argument that imagined political communities form the basis for nationalism. This is not to argue that the Unorganized Militia movement is a nationalist movement. Rather, it is an attempt to stretch the concept of community in the context of a new form of communication that allows a networked form of organization among hitherto isolated individuals. In other words, the formation of a community around imagined or virtual interactions rather than locally-based and historical connections.

Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." (Anderson 1991: 5-6). The concept of nation is inherently *limited* because without an other or others to balance against, the concept of nation is meaningless. Nations are *sovereign* in order to delineate their independence from an age where regimes were based on an all-encompassing religion. It is conceived as a *community* because regardless of reality a nation is perceived as a profound horizontal comradeship. Lastly, it is *imagined* because no one can ever meet all the fellow members of a nation and yet the image of connection to these unknown people remains. This definition of a nation is very relevant when applied to the analysis of the Unorganized Militia movement set forth earlier in this paper.

**The Militia as Limited.** The Militia movement defines itself as the defender of the Constitution and traditional values in the

face of assaults from the global New World Order and a tyrannical federal government. Although membership in this movement is "open to all", it is with the proviso that those wishing to join believe in a conception of reality which contains a sharp delineation between the Militia movement and the rest of society. As Bob Fletcher of the Michigan Militia describes the movement, "We have to forget about right-wing, left-wing. We have good guys and bad guys, that's it." (Klanwatch 1996:71).

**The Militia as Sovereign.** One of fundamental strands within the Militia movement is the declaration of the sovereignty of the local over the federal or the global. This is exemplified by the *Posse Comitatus* (Power of the County) forbear of the Militia movement which held that the highest level of power should be embodied in the office of county sheriff. It is also contained in the very organizational structure of the movement. Although various individuals have attempted to assume the mantle of national leadership, no formal organization exists that controls a large number of militia groups. Rather they are organized at the state and county level and present themselves as defenders of their own particular locale. The newsgroup discourse on Jordan, Montana illustrated this sense of local sovereignty, "...should a "call to arms" become warranted, it should be the responsibility of Montana Militia units, not visitors or wanna-be generals..."

The Militia movement perceives itself as the legitimate descendants of the original Constitution and as such are entitled to sovereignty from the current illegitimate government controlled by a global world order. However, the sovereignty claimed is inherently local without a clear sense of a geographically contiguous militia nation. For example, the Freeman's claims to a sovereign Justus Township is limited to their 960 acre ranch. This local sovereignty becomes linked to the larger concept of militia sovereignty by the association with other sovereign militia areas through computer communications.

**The Militia as a Community.** An important characteristic of the Militia movement is its perception of an array of enemies acting against its mission. This "siege mentality" creates a need for solidarity as one of the April 19th postings stated. "Unity must be achieved SOON or we'll all be annihilated by the encroaching monster called the NEW WORLD ORDER." This unity may be difficult because of to sectarian infighting,

but the fact that the Militia identity is so hotly contested speaks to its importance to the movement.

**The Militia as Imagined.** The last point raised by Anderson is the one that is most directly applicable to the Unorganized Militia's use of computer networks. To imagine a community requires constant reaffirmation that although one does not know or have direct contact with the other members, they exist. Anderson draws an example of this process from the institution of reading the daily newspaper. "At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life." (Anderson 1991:36). Just as reading newspapers connect people to imagined communities, BBSs, Web pages, and Usenet discussion groups reassure militia members that their imagined community is active in daily discourse and exchange.

While newsletters and alternative presses have served to connect marginal communities in the past, computer networks make the connections immediate and highly interactive. As Stern (1996:228) asserts, "Any militia member in remote Montana who had a computer and a modem could be part of an entire worldwide network that shared his or her thoughts, aspirations, organizing strategies, and fear--a global family." Even more crucial is the ability to make connections between the patchwork of sovereign local militia and imagine the concept of a militia networked community. The importance of the physical location of the local in this image-making process is diminished because computer communications allow the imagining of a community connected in cyberspace. In this sense one can argue that there is an imagined network-militia community that acts as a unifying force within the constellation of groups that make up the Militia.

### *The Historical Basis of the Imagined Network Community*

However, while computer networks facilitated the growth of the Unorganized Militia movement, they did not create the movement. Many patriot and militia groups exist without a visible presence on computer networks. The movement emerged at a time of social reorganization that has threatened the dominant position of the largest part of the membership of the militia, i.e., white men. They are not militia members so much because they believe in the militia conspiracies but they believe in conspiracies, because they are unable to understand

why their place in the world has come under challenge. And they are aided greatly in accessing these conspiracy theories through the network of connection built by computer communications.

Therefore, it would be unwarranted to conclude based on the evidence presented in this study that the Unorganized Militia can be directly characterized as a completely computer network-based movement. Rather, the Internet and other computer networks act as an amplifier to trends that are preexisting in society and allow these trends to strengthen their legitimacy and reach. So while the birthplace of the Militia can be found in the transformation in the organizational structures of society, computer networks provide a nurturing environment in which it could imagine itself as a community and expand.

### **BUILDING IMAGINED NETWORK COMMUNITIES**

The previous section suggest that computer networks have been crucial to the way in which the Unorganized Militia movement has redefined the concept of community. In time the model of the imagined network community may help to shape a different conception of community. That is, a community that picks certain cities or areas, perhaps as specific as the few blocks surrounding a city's financial district or a cluster of rural farmers, and establishes a space of interaction that could create a new conception of identity and community. This conception might connect and exclude specific people and places according to the logic of a placeless space of social/economic interaction, i.e., cyberspace.

A crucial question for the viability of a networked community is whether electronic networks can fill the role played by traditional community institutions. Many prominent scholars of community such as Robert Putnam (1995:76) have their doubts: "My hunch is that meeting in an electronic forum is not the equivalent of meeting in a bowling alley--or even in a saloon." Other authors such as Rheingold (1993:62) assert that institutions of society can indeed be built through interactive electronic media. "There's always another mind there. It's like having a corner bar, complete with old buddies and delightful newcomers...It's a place."

The example of imagined network community of the Unorganized Militia movement suggests that the answer lies somewhere in between these opposing views. Computer communications can help communities imagine themselves and expand but the original source of the community emerges from

the struggles and historical reality of individuals and communities located in physical space.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the phrase "Unorganized American Militia movement" is the most descriptive and accurate designation for the movement under study, this article will interchangeably use the terms Militia movement, Unorganized Militia, and American Militia.

<sup>2</sup> While the issue of racism and white supremacy is an important component of the Unorganized Militia movement this study is primarily concerned with issues of organizational structure of the Militia movement and will not treat this subject in great depth. Please refer to the references for further information on this topic.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the access restrictions placed on the use of BBSs, it is not possible to present a more detailed comparison of militia BBSs.

<sup>4</sup> One of the 281 sites associated with the Paul Revere Network

<sup>5</sup> Linda Thompson runs the Associated Electronic News BBS. Thompson declared herself the Acting Adjutant General of the Unorganized Militia, produced the video Waco: The Big Lie, and first formulated the theory that the Oklahoma bombing was a Reichstag play by the government to enable it to crack down on the Militia movement.

<sup>6</sup> The World Wide Web is the subset of the Internet that supports graphical interfaces.

<sup>7</sup> The definition of sophistication of site is used as a measure of level of expertise at which the web page has been constructed. Although the line between categories is subjective, the following criteria were used in classification.

Level 1 = the most basic page generally consisting of some text with one or two graphics.

Level 2 = basic html, background patterns, specified colors, scanned photographs.

Level 3 = multiple linked pages, multiple-graphics.

Level 4 = cgi scripting, use of java, html frames.

<sup>8</sup> The sites below this point were non-existent at the time of the April 19, 1996 survey.

<sup>9</sup> Not to be confused with the Montana Militia (MOM)

<sup>10</sup> In the context of Usenet a "posting" is defined as a message placed on a newsgroup and a "poster" is defined as the person who has placed a posting.

<sup>11</sup> One of the best examples of this validation problem are the parody campaign sites set up for the 1996 Presidential campaign that were done with humorous intent but have been mistaken for the official site on first inspection.

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