

Governance, Structure and Existence:  
Authenticity, Rhetoric, Race and Gender on an Internet Mailing List

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Internet Mailing List**

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***Abstract***

Analysis of internet governance on the large scale is furthered by the study of the ways governance is already emerging online as this elucidates the dynamics of organisation and events and the ways that effective governance may manifest or be disrupted. This paper argues that there are three main factors influencing such governance: the organisation of communication (whether the forum is a mailing list, MOO, Newsgroup, weblog etc); existential issues of 'being' online (such as suspension of being, flame, and patterns of exchange); and the rhetorical mobilization of offline categories.

The paper focuses on the governance of a Mailing list called Cybermind, and gives short case studies of the processes arising in its formation and in two disputes. It shows the ways that issues of organisation, authenticity and categories of gender and race influenced the course of the arguments. In all cases offline issues and categories were fundamental to the disputes, but mediated by the existential factors of online life.

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## **1. Introduction**

In order to make proposals for governance of the internet, or the use of the internet for governance, we must explore how governance has evolved online. Much relevant writing focuses on large scale and abstract issues of governance without exploring actual examples of online behaviour. It tends to focus on the efficacy of particular top-down organisations, where the prime question is how to involve people in what is being offered. Governance is both multi-directional and interactional not simply one way and extrapolation, not based on detailed observation, is speculation at best.

### **1.1 “Governance”**

“Governance” is a vague term. In a well known paper Rhodes argues that it has at least six different meanings (1996, 652-3). Many writers suggest the term naturalises the importation of corporate managerial techniques into State activities, and the blurring of public and business interests. The term becomes prominent after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the decline of a political challenge to corporate order. Surprisingly, a critical attitude to these aspects of the term’s use seems rare<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The term is often situated in terms of contemporaneity. Potapchuk et al (1999) point to the economic crises and public restructurings of the 1980s together with valuations of “economic efficiency” as the origin of the terms common use. The official portal to the EU web site defines governance in terms of the ‘post modern form of economic and political organisations’ (Europa 2004). Rhodes suggests that the term implies ‘a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed’ (1996, 652). It often implies the use of corporate governance models and buzzwords in public life: things such as: managerialism, competition, outcomes, missions, profitability, customers, empowerment etc (1996, 654-5). Stoker draws attention to a general agreement that ‘governance refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred’ (1998, 17). Krahan (2003) likewise points to “governance” as being tied in with the handing over of social services to the private sector; ‘a shift of emphasis from redistribution to regulation’; the use of market principles to coordinate action; the ‘abandonment of the notion of the public interest in favor of policies based on individualism and the market’; seeing the public not as community but as individual consumers; and control of the economies of developing nations. Pagden specifically sees the use of “governance” as a way in which the World Bank imposed Western (i.e. corporate)

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In this paper the term “governance” refers to the ways that groups of people come to decisions, have power struggles, act as a group, or engage in social control<sup>3</sup>. Different cultures may have different ways of governance; different types of governance might exist within one society; and the governance functioning in one situation may differ from that in another<sup>4</sup>. However, governance operating at higher, or wider, social levels, would be affected in its capacity to function via the kinds of governance operating at more immediate levels.

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economic values on Third World States (1998, 7). De Alcantara also points to the term being used ‘to deregulate and liberalise... economies, to open... borders to foreign investment and trade, to keep wages low and flexible’, to scrap social security or price controls, and lower taxes on the wealthy. It helps the shifting of power from State to Corporations, while keeping decision making processes secret and authoritarian. It is connected with the undermining ideas of civic responsibility, the public sphere, the common good, and public support for disadvantaged people (1998, 107-8). See also Doornbos (2003). Weis (2000) gives a brief outline of the concept as defined by a number of global power brokers, and tries to show how the term is used to negotiate struggles within States, and between States and the corporate sector. The State’s role in many uses of ‘governance’ theory seems to be to back the rights of “global capital” at the expense of its citizens. This possibly reflects a weakening of State power relative to corporate power.

This pro-corporate usage may not be implied by academics, but it is as well to remember its patterns of uses in the realm of power.

<sup>3</sup> Potapchuk et al write ‘governance encompasses three interlocking elements: the institutions and mechanisms through which communities make decisions, the formal and informal processes used to this end, and the stakeholders who are included in the deliberations’ (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Trying to avoid Pagden’s claim that there ‘is an underlying conviction in all the literature on governance that the values it represents are inescapable’ and it ‘demands the acceptance of a set of values which those who hold them assume to be... not the creation of a specific culture but the expression of a universal human condition’ (1998, 13).

The main concerns of this paper are the importance of the organisation of communication; existential aspects of being online; and the ways that offline factors can be mobilised, or action can be reincorporated into offline life<sup>5</sup>.

## 1.2 Cyberspace and Governance

Standard views of “cyberspace” describe it as providing a new kind of public space, empowering otherwise silent voices or providing them with valuable information (McDonald 2000; Tanner 2001; Travers 2003)<sup>6</sup>.

Some claim that “cyberspace” should not be regulated, or should be left to the free markets (Barlow 1997; Cox 1997; Post 1997) and hence probably to corporate dominance<sup>7</sup>. This conflation between governance by free markets and freedom reaches into the highest levels of the State. For example:

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<sup>5</sup> It is not intended to imply that these ‘existential factors’ are necessarily universal issues of being online; they might be magnified by Western Anglophone cultures.

<sup>6</sup> McDonald actually argues that making information available will not automatically spark democracy or ‘empowerment’ and attacks the idea that the internet’s supposed isolation from real space will ensure its success as a democratic medium.

<sup>7</sup> Post (1997) argues for the internet as a ‘marketplace of ideas’ referring to Hyek, who’s relative lack of concern for the power differentials occurring within capitalism was marked. There is a massive legal literature on this subject (see Netanel for a brief guide in his book review of Lessig 1999). Post argues that transactions ‘in cyberspace’ cannot be regulated in the same way as normal international transactions because ‘activity in cyberspace is not functionally identical to activity in realspace’ (2002, 12). Post (1997) seems to propose that ISPs become ‘the essential units of governance’ i.e. he effectively imports a geographical metaphor back into his argument while dismissing geography to make it. The legal problem circulates around the conflict between local and, non-existent, global laws. It seems tempting for Western theorists to propose that idealised Western capitalist values should form the basis of global laws, not seeing them as just another local with greater power. Whether or not the internet can be considered as a space, it is certainly not homogeneous with the same features everywhere (Marshall 2001). Another common argument seems to be that as there are no bodies in cyberspace there is no way to enforce laws or that ‘physical force is never an element’ (Barlow 2000). This neglects the fact that the person’s body is somewhere, and that States can and do enforce laws within the territories inhabited by the bodies of people using the internet.

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The Clinton Administration's "Framework for Global Electronic Commerce" [calls] for private sector leadership and reliance on market forces and self-regulation; their internet "Tsar," Ira Magaziner, was even more direct: "We are not going to interfere with the essentially free nature of the internet" (Kobrin 2001)<sup>8</sup>.

However as Kobrin and others point out, things like property, freedom, benefits, technology and so on, are socially produced and controlled phenomena, not things in themselves, and thus depend on the way the wider society is being shaped and structured<sup>9</sup>. Visions of a new freedom or new public sphere seem entangled with opposing ideas of a "digital divide", whether new or expressing already existing power dynamics (Drahos & Braithwaite 2002 etc).

Other studies have concentrated on technical aspects of internet governance such as Mueller's (2002) analysis of the struggle over the allocation of domain names, or Lessig's studies (1999, 2001) of the way that corporate power has lead to the installation of an architecture of control at the code or program level. Lessig suggests that while the regulation of law is visible, regulation by code (or the guiding of choice by code) is largely invisible and thus harder to

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<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the Cross-Industry Working Team, architectural report on the National Information Infrastructure demands, amongst other things that "The NII must promote the principles of free enterprise", while insisting on copyright and identification of users (XIWT 1994).

<sup>9</sup> The well known fights over copyright fit in here. On the whole it appears as if copyright regulations are being extended and intensified, which is what we might expect if corporatism is the dominant force in our "information economy", or that the internet reinforces existing trends (Marshall 2003b). Krieger suggests that the real dispute about the internet is about corporate control of trademarks, domain names and copyright and 'they've latched onto a nice, potentially neutral, almost godmother apple pie term called formal governance' (2000). It seems true that Mike Roberts of ICANN uses the term governance to avoid consideration of the political and social aspects of ICANN's work (Roberts 2000, sections 'Is ICANN Governance?' and 'ICANN: Public Policy or Technical Management?'). See also the worries of Nesson (2000), Fenello (2000) and Barlow (2000) about ICANN being captured by corporate interests.

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resist (1999, 95-99). Perhaps an example of governance by code occurred with the abandonment of the 'Sociable Web' project, which was intended to allow 'people to see who else was on a page and to communicate with them', largely because 'a service that requires a non-standard browser is not a practical solution, unless you are a big company, anxious to take on Microsoft and Netscape, etc.' (Donath & Robertson 1996a, 1996b). There is always some kind of material organisation affecting what is likely to occur.

Other theorists imply that the internet is some kind of anarchy ruled by technical consensus and will remain that way (Barlow 2000). Such theorists refer to internet folklore rather than engage with the way the internet and computer communication developed while enmeshed in various fields of power (Military, Corporate, Academic, State and Programmer) and the ways that this influenced decisions and the adoption of protocols. The anarchy felt by programmers may only have been possible because Academia and the State moderated other authority.

In the absence of regulation the most powerful will impose their own. There is no guarantee that an organisation which arises "spontaneously" will be inherently democratic, yet interconnection will occur. To quote Massey from a different context: 'what is at issue is not whether or not we are going to have a more interconnected world, but what will be the form of that interconnectivity' (2002).

Currently, interaction on the internet is primarily governed by issues of a) access, b) the way communication is structured and users can act, c) existential and cultural factors which have developed online, and d) the way words and rhetoric mobilise existing offline factors. The first factor is not being considered here. The second factor asserts that governance may change with the way communication is organised and power can be manoeuvred and thus whether the internet forums we are considering are Mailing Lists, MOOs and MUDs, IRC, Newsgroups, Chatrooms, Bulletin Boards, Blogs, or Websites etc, all of which structure emission and response

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differently<sup>10</sup>. The organisation of communication determines who can block others, who can 'speak' to who, how communication is exchanged, how contacts are made, and how different groups can form, interact or co-operate.

Distinctions between established and outsider (Elias & Scotson 1994), while imprecise, are still important online and form a way people recognise aggression and expertise<sup>11</sup>. Being established means being recognised favourably, having built more complex ties with other established people, (which perhaps might survive a temporary focus on dispute) and having a tendency to stick together when faced with unrecognised or unfavourably recognised outsiders. Established people know local customs, local communication networks and local power relations, and see each other in a more favourable light than they might otherwise. People may attempt to situate others in particular established or outsider categories in order to make their remarks more or less persuasive. Established and Outsider categories can be already established offline and easily affect online behaviour and group relations.

This paper aims to explore some factors involved in governance online by extrapolating the processes of governance observed upon a Mailing List called Cybermind.

## **2. Organisation and Existence**

Firstly I want to consider the effects of the organisation of communication in the Mailing List.

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'interactivity' is broad. Many political web sites claiming to be interactive, only allow their audience a small range of pre-formatted options, none of which change anything.

<sup>11</sup> A cynic might define an 'expert' as a person who is adept at saving the world view of the groups they represent. Certainly to count as expert, a person must be recognised by some group as such.

## 2.1 Mailing Lists<sup>12</sup>.

On a mailing List, each member 'subscribes' by registering with the computer from which the List is run. They then receive all the mail (including their own, unless they choose otherwise) mailed to that List. Staying subscribed implies people are fairly committed and connected to the group – whereas, for example, newsgroups may be read only sporadically<sup>13</sup>. However, despite this commitment, on every List I know, only a small proportion of List subscribers contribute regularly<sup>14</sup>.

Lists may be "moderated" when someone (usually the List owner), exerts overt control over the List. Control may range from almost non-existent, through onlist discussion, to "fully moderated", where the Moderator reads all mail before sending it to the List. List governance depends upon the Moderator for sanctions and people will entreat the Moderator's support or action in offlist mail. The Moderator's main powers include approving those who subscribe, gaining added information about posting patterns, threatening to remove members, banning mails, or closing the List down. They have little power to impose their will, unless there are offline reasons why this direction should be obeyed, and they can distribute few rewards which are different in kind to the rewards everyone can distribute (such as recognition, praise etc). This differs from a MOO where moderators or Wizards have various powers they can use to gain, or reward, followers and thus get payoffs within the forum.

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<sup>12</sup> In 1997 Treese claimed there were 71,618 mailing Lists in the lizst.com directory. In 2004 the LSOFT website claimed there were 69,397 *public* lists using Listserv software. This was only 21% of lists using this software. Many other lists use majordomo software or yahoo groups, and so would not be counted here. Mailing Lists are not rare.

<sup>13</sup> It is possible to remain reluctantly subscribed to a List because of inability to unsubscribe, and therefore automatically trash the whole list without reading it. Offhand I find it hard to believe that many people have the technical ability to do this and not to write to an active List, or List member, asking for clarification on how to leave. It is not rare for people to write in asking such questions.

<sup>14</sup> Simple arithmetic shows that if all members of a List of 300 members post once a day then the List will become unreadable. Silence is demanded for List functionality.

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In theory, moderator power could be total. However, given the embedding values of offline life, their power is unstable and largely depends upon their persuasive ability, and the forces keeping people on the List<sup>15</sup>. Conflict can easily arise over authority. On Cybermind, as there was no ritual or symbolic differentiation of the Moderator from other List members<sup>16</sup> and he had no offlist power or influence, it was possible for others (particularly newcomers who did not recognise him), to categorise his power as arbitrary or illegitimate. Disputes about moderator decisions could bring the List to near halt. Consequently, Moderators have to be careful when using their powers and they most commonly act to remove new or 'outsider' members, who can be construed as attacking the List, as these people have built little support. People on internet forums are often suspicious of newcomers, especially if they do something unusual<sup>17</sup>.

Lists may have multiple moderators, but it is hard to sustain a committee of moderators without an offline payoff; moderation is often simply more work. This again differs from MOOs where it is easier to distribute rewards which have value in the life of the MOO itself.

On Newsgroups openness of access, and lack of a central organisational point, means there is little anyone can do to prevent disruption, except issuing threats. Consequently they have a greater reputation for flame, or intensely vituperative exchange, and irrelevance. As a result, people often construct a "killfile" so that messages from particular addresses will be hidden from them. This practice seems more overt on Newsgroups than on Mailing Lists, probably because of their greater impersonality, but usage may increase with

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<sup>15</sup> See Douglas on problems of leadership in groups where leaving is easy and boundaries vague and unenforceable (1987, 38ff.).

<sup>16</sup> Hierarchical structures are usually justified by magical intangibles like "birth", "gender", "talent", or "charisma", etc.

<sup>17</sup> Within the first two weeks of my joining one academic List, no less than three other newcomers had been accused of trolling, or deliberately attempting to provoke a flame war.

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low moderation on a List which people feel is important for its offline effects. However the efficacy of killfiles is limited as it does not remove the responses by others to the person one is ignoring. Thus flames can still appear to “flood” a newsgroup, even when killfiles are used. Likewise mails of potential interest from people on the killfile may never be seen, distancing the user from the group and its processes.

Lists usually have a topic which is the central focus of the group. The amount of leeway to post off-topic varies from List to List, depending largely on group feedback. A tendency appears for people to define the ‘community’ of a List in terms of the presence of off-topic posts, as these give personal information and allow more complex ties to develop between members. The paradox arises that the stronger the community, and the less on topic posts, the more people will leave because of the volume of irrelevance (Marshall 2000, Chap.12 part 1)<sup>18</sup>.

Even if a List remains on topic, the average thread, or discourse under a particular subheading, is over within a week. Threads with no postings made in over three days have usually terminated (Marshall 2000, Appendix.I: #VII). Lists tend to have a short attention span; a letter a person did not have time to respond to, can be buried by new mail calling for new replies. Any continuing discussion must have people bringing it forward, or volume<sup>19</sup>.

Volume is a definite factor in online governance. Vital information can be hidden in ‘data smog’, or data overload, while information is never obviously complete (Shenk 1997). People with offlist time and support can flood online forums with their views, control debate and determine what counts as data. The volume of a particular type of mail also gives the ambience, or even the

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<sup>18</sup> In this sense, posts which might seem irrelevant to the analyst constitute a vital part of online life and cannot be ignored.

<sup>19</sup> Often organisations set up Mailing Lists for promotion, but unless those Lists have people whose job it is to write mail, then the Lists can easily lapse into silence and suggest the organisation is moribund.

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identity of the group (such as the nature of its politics, its level of aggression etc.), and thus influences who will find the group welcoming. High volume posters have a huge effect on List life.

Volume also undermines participation, as it makes response to every relevant mail difficult and diminishes the chance of, or feeling of, being truly listened to thus increasing feelings of dislocation. Volume undermines coherence by introducing digression. Volume, often seen as a sign of health, may lead to people leaving as they cannot cope with that much mail. It also becomes a problem for those wishing to communicate with others. The volume of mail they receive may be too great to reply to individually, leaving correspondents feeling snubbed.

Time between responses is also important. The usual distinction is between synchronous (MOOs, Chat) and asynchronous (Lists, Newsgroups) communication. With synchronous communication records are rarely kept without special effort, and so people absent from a discussion miss it; while with asynchronous communication all members can generally read the discussion, and are theoretically able to give considered responses. Usually synchronous communications are structured to allow small group, or pair, formation in private, which can make for easier complex bondings while facilitating internal disputes. With asynchronous communications special effort must be made to have private communications, especially in groups; however it is easier to have multiple topics running simultaneously and thus keep different interests engaged.

Shortness of time between replies can be a cause, or symptom, of dispute. When someone posted 25 mails in an uninterrupted row to Cybermind, this was perceived as aggression (Marshall 2000, Chap.11). Flame wars tend to have little pause. Fast replies keep the memory, or mood, of the dispute/hurt alive. As inability to continue the exchange, is usually taken as defeat, quick unconsidered replies can become more common.

Online correspondence, unlike offline conversation, is often not closed.

Conversation usually finishes with all participants knowing that messages have been received or acknowledged, even if only by grunts or goodbyes. Email communication tends to close in silence, when participants have no more to say, or when mail gets lost<sup>20</sup>. This produces a lack of closure in discourse, which contributes to the existential effect I have called *asence*.

## 2.2 Existence: Asence, Flame & Co-operation

The term “asence” refers to the blurring between presence and absence online. Asence denotes the state of being present, or interacting with others, without being aware of reception, or being able to fine tune communication as it proceeds. It is a suspension of recognition, or even of ‘being’. In offline societies it is generally possible to tell whether a person is present or not. Online a person is neither entirely present or entirely absent. Presence manifests only in those moments in which you emit text and have that text acknowledged. There is no marker of existence beyond the act of communication itself. Generally, there is no certainty whether you have been received, or read, or of the nature of your reader’s reaction. Your presence is always drifting away. Status, without offline markers, has to be continually re-earned and re-presented. If the idea of Asence is correct then it diminishes the probability that we can have any kind of simple co-presence online<sup>21</sup>.

Asence is emphasised by uncertainty about audience. List or Newsgroup members have little idea who is actually present. People you think might be present may not be receiving mail. They may be off List for a few days without notification, or be skipping mail if busy. Messages to which you anticipate a response can go unnoticed. Therefore, you may be engaged in conflict, or

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<sup>20</sup> Langa’s research (2004) suggests 40% of all emails get lost. Despite problems with his mathematics (he seems to forget that loss would occur in both emission and response), and problems with him using the subject line of ‘hello’ for his tests (when many people auto delete mails with that subject line as spam), the loss has to be regarded as statistically significant, and not a minor matter. Issues around his volunteer respondent drop out are less important as that still indicates that mail (and projects) are commonly abandoned without notification or closure.

risk personal revelation, and those you expect to notice or give support do not, and thus you seem snubbed or absent and “community” seems fragile (Marshall 2000, Chap.12 part.1: #IV.2).

With the inability to adjust communication as it proceeds, it is easy for text to be misinterpreted and meanings to diverge. Ruesch and Bateson, in another context, have discussed how people can feel helpless or insecure if they do not receive acknowledgment of their messages and how ‘the individual feels paralysed if correction of erroneous interpretations is impossible’ (1987, 39-40). Asence is generally uncomfortable.

Flaming, or vituperative exchange, is well known in online life, and is frequently explained by positing that the internet allows aggression with little consequences for offline life. However, people who “flame” or “troll” Lists, might be people who cannot cope with asence. They have to be acknowledged, so they aim for the acknowledgment of rejection. Because of the way communication is organised, and because their audience is large and uncoordinated, there is bound to be someone who will respond<sup>22</sup>. The responses engendered confirm their existence and reduce asence, even if it leads to expulsion. Shirky points out that if people agree with a post then discussion, and hence presence, ends. The main way that online discussion and presence can continue is with disagreement, so ‘the liveliest and longest

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<sup>21</sup> To labour the obvious, lurkers may feel asence, but asence is not just about lurking.

<sup>22</sup> If I suggest something offensive to my reader in “one to one” email, then they can either ignore it, or respond and discuss it. If we are close, the correspondence continues because a decision is made (involving only two people) that the relationship is too important (or multi stranded), to engage in abuse which might threaten it. If, however, I write something offensive or irritating to a proportion of a group of 300 people, most of whom don’t know me or vice-versa, then by force of numbers someone is likely to respond strongly on some occasions. This may stimulate others, who in turn stimulate others, until the volume becomes large enough for people to flame others for flaming – even if I have decided make peace, or even if there were only a few people initially involved. The resultant struggle has nothing to do with whether it is easier to express hatred or not in email, simply that it is harder to get all 300 or so people, with little other interconnection, to stop responding.

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running discussions tend to be the ones in which the most people disagree with each other' (1995, 44)<sup>23</sup>.

Conflict, relationship and exchange are more common *within* online groups than *between* them – something less pronounced with offline groups<sup>24</sup>. People on a List have to be persuaded into combat or co-operation with external groups, whereas internal combat arises spontaneously.

Cooperation or conflict between online groups derives from the relationship between groups in the embedding society. It is difficult to organise intergroup activities without an offline world anchor. It is also difficult to organise ingroup activities without dedicated people who have the offline time to keep bringing the project forward into visibility and existence, or out of asence. People who will not cooperate with a group project are often hidden, so success may seem more likely than it actually is. It seems hard to translate online enthusiasm into *sustained* action of any type. Taking the action offline increases the difficulty<sup>25</sup>. These issues may well originate offline and not be innate to the Net. Where people are already alienated from action, talk may well be the only activity people are willing to risk.

Therefore, it seems difficult for online organisation to have much effect in the offline world unless there are already existing social structures and organisations to implement them. Furthermore it might be the case that once an online organisation has implemented its aims offline, it no longer has anything to keep it continuing online.

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<sup>23</sup> In Tanner's study of a Chilean internet discussion on the arrest of Pinochet, only three people, in over 1600 mails, wrote in to say they agreed with someone. When a person responded to a criticism then the "debate usually degenerated into name-calling and insults" (2001, 393).

<sup>24</sup> Forwards of mail from one list to another might sometimes count as intergroup exchange, but in general few people respond back to the group of origin.

<sup>25</sup> See the many discussions on the Presidential Campaign of Howard Dean.

### 2.3 Authenticity

Although it has frequently been suggested that people use the internet to explore a 'postmodern' multiple or decentered self (Turkle 1995), this is rarely the case in practice (Marshall 2000, Chap.7). The main aim seems to be to display the authentic self and, more importantly, to discover the authentic self of others<sup>26</sup>. Role playing is more common on MOOs, where props anchor character, than on Lists, but when people begin to make complex bonds between themselves, then uncovering the authentic nature of the other becomes important. Perhaps this becomes the way that most statements become evaluated as true or deceptive. Issues of authenticity are emphasised by the awareness that the other is hidden, and may be false.

Contemporary models of authenticity are intertwined with ideas of individualistic freedom and self expression. People often seem to consider that what they define as unpleasant or aggressive is the real, and the pleasant is a front, particularly if the unpleasant was previously private. Secret corruption seems more real than hidden virtue (Trilling 1974, 141). Overt social rules and conventions are usually considered to restrict authenticity. Authenticity 'is implicitly a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion' (Trilling 1974, 94)<sup>27</sup>. However authenticity needs to be recognized and, paradoxically, is indicated by conventions which include references to "the body" (race, gender), to "underlying emotions", and to breaking rules. Assumptions about authenticity may contribute to flaming, when people identify a strong response with a genuine response.

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<sup>26</sup> Despite the importance of the term 'authenticity' to existentialism and other forms of modern discourse (cf Adorno 1973, Wrathall & Malpas 2000 etc), the term is used here without positing the existence of an authentic subjectivity, or even the possibility of acting 'genuinely', but points out that people seem to behave as if this were both possible and valuable.

<sup>27</sup> Trilling argues that authenticity makes much of what was once valued seem 'mere fantasy or ritual or downright falsification', and that much of what was formerly excluded, such as disorder and violence, gains considerable moral authority because of its supposed authenticity (1974, 11). See also Taylor (1991, 63-5).

Tension may also arise between: a) standards of avoiding conflict in intimate relationships; and b) the demand for transparency or authenticity. Strong emotional statements can be framed as truthful, *or* as aggressive and antagonistic, leading to more uncertainty. Another paradox might be that to emphasise who you are online, you have to exaggerate the markers of that state, until it becomes inaccurate and distorts who you are<sup>28</sup>.

#### **2.4 Mobilisation of the Offline**

Meaning and action occurs within a context, and this context allows resolution of meaning. These contexts are not only provided by the history of the online forum but by wider events and people's knowledge of the world, which includes the participants' offline power and status.

As online communication largely occurs in a language which has gained its meanings offline, offline categories remain important and may become more exaggerated when they allow the interpretation of the statements of others. Thus if you perceive someone as categorised by having certain politics, gender or race then their statements may be interpreted in terms of clichés about those categories rather than in terms of their possible complexity. A large part of online argument seems to be trying to situate opponents in terms of such categories so their arguments can be dismissed. The most disruptive exchanges on Cybermind always expressed real world category oppositions, and often could only be resolved by voluntary silence on one side, or mutual exhaustion.

The rest of this paper considers several incidences of the rhetorical use of these categories to establish expertise and to render the words of others

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<sup>28</sup> This issue is covered in more detail in Marshall 2000, 2003a.

persuasive or not, and to show how this usage interacted with the structures of communication and factors of existence on Cybermind<sup>29</sup>.

### **3. Examples and History**

#### **3.1 Cybermind**

Cybermind was founded by Alan Sondheim and Michael Current in 1994 for the study of the 'philosophical and psychological implications of subjectivity in cyberspace'. It was initially part of the spoon-collective, which separated from Kent Palmer's ThinkNet group, over issues of appropriate language and subject matter. Palmer thought that 'absolute freedom of speech would soon degenerate into inane chatter and nihilism' and was concerned with 'legal issues around the viewing of inappropriate material by minors' and by the use of profanity (1999).

ThinkNet was set up so that although Palmer dealt with the administrative load, other people moderated the Lists – a division which was bound to cause difficulties and which proved too much for him (Palmer, 1999). According to those present, conflict arose over debates on Current's Deleuze List. As a result Current and Malgosia Askanas transferred their Lists from ThinkNet to their own control. To avoid the problems of one person dealing with the administrative load and paying all the costs, they set up the spoon collective. Cybermind was started shortly afterwards. Both spoon and Cybermind were established in proclamation of freedom and as forums for authentic and open expression. However issues of power and organisation soon arose; openness and official lack of structure were problematic.

In the first week of operation Cybermind had a flame war over spelling and appropriate language. Another discussion about what could constitute offensiveness around issues of race and homosexuality lead to the insertion

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<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere I have written on the use of categories of place and space in political arguments about the nature of the internet (Marshall 2001). For the legal aspects of this kind of argument see Hunter (2003).

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of a statement in the list manifesto, that although matter and language would not be censored, 'racial or other bias slurs will not be tolerated'.

During these disputes Sondheim and Current privately discussed the possibility of full moderation in which every mail would be read by them before it was posted to the List. This did not eventuate, as we might expect given the group's recent history. Discussing full moderation onlist would have disrupted the explicit values of letting Cybermind set its own direction and produced protest. There were few precedents or trust established on the List, even though many people knew each other from other Lists. Using Moderator sanctions might have destroyed the perceptions of equality and freedom, and caused people to leave. Moderation has to gain "established" status to be acceptable.

The spoon collective later transferred its Lists to IATH at University of Virginia and this transformed the relationships between the collective members. At the University they had far more administrative power and, as Askanas tells it, there was:

*more of a tendency for internal stratification in Spoon: the people who understand the system and the people whose commitment is to 'spoon as a project' tend to acquire greater indispensability and de-facto power than the others [...] in this environment, people who really, in the long run, don't want to become more involved, are in danger of feeling marginalized and pushed out. So in spite of the fact that we have a collective horror of coercion, there is a certain degree of coercion towards a certain style of being-in-spoon. This would not have arisen if we had stayed at world, where we were all basically equally powerless. (1996)*

Given this enstructuring within spoons and its ideology, tensions became inevitable. About twelve months later, differences between Sondheim and some other members of spoon led to his resignation from the Collective, and Cybermind moved to a Listserve at America Online, with a guarantee of free speech. Alan remarked that 'Cyb... didn't belong [on spoons]; they're academic, tight-assed – we've been wild. We had to protect our Lists; the

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thoughtfulness', and that they could be a virtue ('typos or fast-speech-in-e-space or whatever it is, can produce positive effects'), citing the error of 'realativity' as 'actually pretty provocative', although not developing this "provocation".

Discussion began to break down, when Ann responded to Liz's statement that Liz did not want to have to avoid words which 'may offend shall we say, more delicate sensibilities'. Ann, mobilising categories of gender, wrote:

*I find it offputting. I tend to judge people who use obscenities quite negatively. I assume that they lack cogent language, they've run out of real arguments.*

*Plus, I feel they show a lack of respect for the reader, especially for the many very young readers on the net, and, frequently, for women (whose minimal presence is often noted).*

Ann's worries about gender divide did not work. Some List members considered that 'obscenities', along with "non-standard grammars", implied authentic and transparent communication. Cynthia responded:

*and on obscenities: don't assume. i'm a girl and i use them all the time, and not because i am at a loss for words or can't manage an argument. they have other uses [...] (they can be a sign of specific acculturation).*

Yet another female reader was even more direct. Livia wrote a one line reply<sup>30</sup>: 'Cogent language, yet? Gimme a fucking break'.

Ann then stated her rejection of Livia publicly rather than acting in private: 'Sorry, you get no break. My negative judgment is upon you. I will delete all further messages from you unread'. Livia responded:

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<sup>30</sup> The one line reply is an email convention. Large amounts of the original letter may be quoted, and the line appended usually is intended as an amusing and/or dismissive comment. It is an obvious form of one-upmanship. However, if a one liner appended to a large letter is not made by an established person, it may be construed as indicating incompetence and be taken as a 'waste of bandwidth'.

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*What do you other cybers think? I happen to be 'off put' by the Freshman Comp teacher mentality. Yeah... of course I was a Freshman comp teacher. Never had the mentality, though... kids learned to write just fine .. without idiotic attitudes about 'writing cogently'*

Here Livia uses authenticity in attack, implying Ann is teaching a subject which is taught easily, which people learn automatically (as expression results from inner authenticity), and which she has taught successfully herself<sup>31</sup>. Ann, it is implied, is setting up elitist barriers, or promoting 'falsity', and Livia makes an appeal to an unspecified creativity of not acknowledging 'rules' – which, as seen earlier, marked the spelling mistake as “provocative”.

With authenticity as a virtue, freedom to express one's true self becomes a prime requirement, and must not be silenced. Alan's first reply makes appeal to net discourses of freedom and anarchy and to Cybermind as an alternate public space (as with the normal hope for cyberspace), which accepted more and different people. Alan writes:

*No one has authority here beyond the words he or she speaks. I for one would regret anyone unsubscribing because of someone else's faulty spelling, but I would rather tolerate the unsubs than set down protocol*

It is clear from Alan and Michael's discussion of full moderation that certain people can have power beyond their text, but its use would possibly destroy what they were aiming for. It may also reflect his sense of lack of power to influence events and bring peace.

Alan's phrase 'beyond the words he or she speaks' illustrates that email tends (unless the person is being specifically careful), to be characterised as speech rather than text. Comments on proofreading have the potential to be read as comments on speech rather than comments on text. To comment on writing style, is a form of exclusion, as tactless to this audience as commenting negatively on someone's appearance or accent in front of others might be

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<sup>31</sup> Ann did not teach composition, and was quite clear about her profession.

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offline. Text is their only evidence of being, which again explains why typos (marks) rather than unclarity (absence) became the focus.

Ann's insistence that any one on the net was privileged, was not a good response here, as it situated her as outsider to dominant list values.<sup>32</sup>

A number of writers suggested that Ann should 'use the delete key' to solve her problem. That is to delete mail unread, or set up a killfile. The implication she should delete mail by particular writers is *not* mentioned. Deleting is common but has a certain edge if done publicly as it increases possibilities of asence. Openly mentioning it, as opposed to privately doing it, is perceived as a hostile act. No one suggested that those who found Ann's comments annoying or irrelevant should simply delete *her* posts. Calling for a specific action may have been too overtly hostile to her, or perhaps people perceived the disruption as originating with her rather than with the people who responded to her, due to her outsider status. Other List members already shared an established culture which, despite aims of inclusion, was acting to exclude.

The response to her mails was also a misreading, she was not concerned with issues of authenticity and thus was rendered ascent herself, and eventually left.

Immediately after the dispute in which the most vocal participants (Ann, Livia,

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<sup>32</sup> Alan writes in response:

*I know for a fact there are a \_lot\_ of poor people (economically) on the Net; this is \_not\_ an arena where elitism should be tolerated.*

Cynthia wrote:

*authority, i'd argue, is highly overrated. granted that the net tends to be available to and used by elite folks but 'elite' doesn't always translate the same way. moreover, woldn't it be more interesting to be talking to varieties of people, not just those who talk like you do?*

Michael also talked of net democracy, the blurring of boundaries and the mixing of people on the Deleuze List.

Liz and Cynthia) had claimed female identities and made use of feminism to attack each other, another woman proposed the question: 'Are women netters less likely to be flamethrowers? Are we marginalized on the net?' This shows the resilience of gender clichés online, but claims of gender unity and pacifism were not able to overcome conventions of authenticity.

### 3.3 Mobilisation of Race and Gender

The next example occurred more recently during the build up to the Iraq war, when issues of nationality (identity categories) became marked. Many US members of the List, including those who opposed the Bush Administration, felt that the criticism of American actions by non-American List members was anti-American. There is no evidence from Cybermind to support the proposition that nationality disappears online. Long established ties were becoming frayed and people were leaving. Eventually controversy was largely avoided through a stream of one line jokes, usually with sexual innuendoes. This drove away many people who had subscribed for the List topic and made the List more fragile. The spontaneous way of repairing things actually helped weaken them. During this period a series of arguments focusing on issues of race and gender arose.

The main moves in these events were made in terms of locating both people and argument within "opposed" categories as follows:

Established	Outsider
Knowledgeable	Biased
Gender	Race

In a thread dealing with 'cyber-romance' Claire (from Belgium) posted the following tale:

*2 years ago I knew a girl here in Belgium, she started on internet in July 2000, discovered chatting almost immediately ... she was really into funk music ... chatted mostly with Americans, met a cool black guy, fell in love, had cybersex, the works. Went to New York 2 months later to meet him, was very much in love, came back, found an E-mail from*

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*him, telling her: "Hey, it wasn't just me, it was me and 4 pals leading you on! We pulled straws on who got to fuck you when you came over!!!"*

*Ah well, she was too gullible, but on the other hand internet isn't as "evolved" in Belgium as it seems to be in other countries, so down here we couldn't even imagine that anyone would even think of doing stuff like that.*

Responses to the post by established List members were likewise phrased in terms of gender and gullibility. However, Howard (a black internet activist) wrote his first post to the List portraying Claire's post entirely in racial terms:

*Haha! That's a very funny STORY. Of course, I'm pretty sure that's all it is, a story, because the whole construction of it reads as a typical thinly-veiled racist fantasy. I've been on the net long enough to recognize bullshit, and you just dumped a steaming pile on the List.*

*You folks are pitiful. I thought CYBERMIND was supposed to contain at least a slightly higher level of discourse than alt.return.of.the.third.reich, but I guess I was wrong.*

Howard characterises the post as an urban myth, implies Claire and the List are racist and marks himself, whether deliberately or not, as an outsider with expertise. Immediate responses from established List members were relatively good humoured, and some recognise his point. However as Claire is established it is assumed her anecdote is true, especially given the reported personal contacts. In such a situation it might be considered racist to draw attention to race. Besides, there is a long tradition of alarm about the authenticity of 'cyberlove' (Marshall 2003a). Most List members will categorise the issue as a gender matter not a racial one. In response Howard analyses Claire's message in more detail. He alleges the general format is: White girl transgresses White Supremacy. She is punished for transgressing the Rules. Lesson:

*Stay away from those Negroes, especially the cyber ones.*

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*They might seem nice, but then they turn into O.J. Simpson.*

Dave, who is now the List's main moderator, recodes Howard's response in terms of 'race sensitivity', instancing Howard's previous offlist behaviour ("authentic uncovering" through google), accuses him of not knowing the List as he only joined recently (i.e. Howard is categorised as an outsider and thus without expertise in this matter. Dave can check the date when Howard joined), and challenges him to prove that there is a 'race agenda' by quoting from the List archives<sup>33</sup>. Dave seems sure this cannot be proven, and I think, on the whole, he is correct. Most members of Cybermind have previously presented a consciously anti-racist posture. Dave then recodes the incident back into issues of gender, writing 'This is how a lot of men behave'.

The introduction of race provokes other responses and things move out of control or confinement. Lucian writes:

*If more 'negroes' stopped reading race into everything, they'd be much happier.*

And

*Howard should come over to the II List at Harvard where he could get shouted down by a bunch of tragic mulattos.*

This is easily seen as patronising, but is also self referential. Lucian is a long standing multi-racial member of the II, or Interracial Individuals, List himself, and is referring to a particular politics of the end of race. But few can realise this as they have little other contact with Lucian<sup>34</sup>. Lucian is saved from attack by other established List members by being established, and it becomes clear that his potential rudeness is not perceived, or at least remembered, as people will later even deny List members have been rude or patronising.

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<sup>33</sup> To Howard being black gives a lived knowledge of racism, while to the List, being established gives a lived knowledge of Cybermind. There is competition between which categorisation is more dominant and authentic.

<sup>34</sup> Most readers would not recognise the name "II List", or its subject matter.

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Lucian provokes other responses. Another black List member (MD) makes his first post (again identified as such by Dave), writing that 'It beats being shouted down by a bunch of tragic white supremacists'. This remark, as becomes clear later, was directed at Lucian, but because of the ambiguity of plain text was largely seen as referring to the List as a whole.

Reaction against accusations of racism made by outsiders, reinforced the assertion that gender is the governing category, not only through argument but through flirting (some of which involved Howard), and the general assertion that 'guys are assholes'. This implicitly made gender behaviour something which transcended race. Gender united, while race fragmented. One woman who returned to the List while the debate was going on, described black men as sex-gods, something that neither MD nor Howard openly objected to, and this lead back to the sexual innuendoes which had become common during the tension over Iraq.

Later MD rejected the bridging function of gender, specifically alleging that Black Women are corrupted by white feminists and that there was no similarity between the issues faced by women anywhere and black men in America. People would try and make connection with MD via leftist politics, but that was dangerous due to the background political disputes on the List. He was also asked to stop attacking people. People could not apparently see how he could construe List members as having been offensive to him. Similarly people who would normally object to the motive that as their gender was invisible online it did not matter, would write mail to the effect that MD could not know what colour they were. Eventually one of the moderators, who had been away for most of the dispute, would remove MD for insulting Lucian, after Lucian alleged that MD had sent him some anti-semitic writing offlist.

This is the most overt use of moderator power in these events, but it is disorganised, uncoordinated and apparently without consultation (no one protested openly) and used against an outsider. However, as well as discovering how recently Howard and MD had joined the List, Dave would

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frequently mention that other people had written to him offlist, claiming that some of these people were black and were critical of the newcomers. No names and numbers were mentioned, but a hidden list tonality could be constructed in support of the status quo. This type of action was common on other occasions, and works because the List is largely invisible.

#### **4 Conclusion**

I have briefly discussed the effect of structural, existential and cultural factors on governance of an internet group. The ways that communication is organised affects the kinds of moderation which can be employed, the kinds of rewards which can be distributed and the kinds of connections which develop. It also implied that cooperation between online groups would be difficult unless supported by offline factors. Existential issues affecting online governance included several feedback loops including the relationship between off-topic posts both reinforcing and undermining a sense of 'community'; the relationship between volume and interpretation of messages; patterns of exchange; flame and recognition. Other existential issues included lack of closure in email, invisibility of others, and asence (or the ambivalence between presence and absence). The continuum, and relations, between outsider and established also effects reception and the perception of argument. Cultural problems around issues of authenticity seemed to be important, especially the paradoxes generated by how authenticity is displayed and determined. The body is a basis of determination of authenticity, and thus emotions, gender and race became important. Strength, or irregularity, of response is also taken as genuine. Untrammelled freedom, while indicating authenticity, brings in problems of noise and conflict. Finally the most obvious rhetorics deployed seemed to use figures of authenticity and involve issues of how participants, and arguments, could be categorised. The main moves seemed to be about putting arguments and people into offline categories to determine the field of dispute and to evaluate people's statements and their claims to expertise favourably or otherwise.

Any governance must be adapted to these kinds of factors or it will seem irrelevant, alienating, or at best imposed. It will miss the actual features of the way people interact online and thus be unable to further productive interaction.

In practical terms it is suggested that people interested in the use of the internet for particular projects realise that different ways of organising

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communication have different effects, and thus ask whether the proposed structure allows people to do what they want or need to do, and what kind of interactions it encourages.

People should also ask how they are going to deal with the paradoxes of online existence such as; asence; off-topic mails generating both community and divergence; of the problems around authenticity, anonymity and exaggeration; of the ambiguities of public and private; and the ways that volume can diminish participation.

Then people may need to consider the problems of getting the online group to act as a group relative to other groups. If this can be achieved then it may reinforce group identity and lead to an increased chance of coherent action offline, but it may not be necessary. This finally leads to the questions of what kind of offline structures need to be in place to give the group importance, and to allow action to be transferred from the online world to the offline.

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