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**Religious Movements
and the Internet:
The New Frontier
of Cult Controversies**

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RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND THE INTERNET: THE NEW FRONTIER OF CULT CONTROVERSIES

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ABSTRACT

The development of the Internet has been seen with apprehension by some as a new, powerful proselytizing tool for emergent religious movements. The thesis of this chapter is that the Internet – being a means of communication which even lone individuals are able to use efficiently – has probably up to this point helped critics of religious movements more than the movements themselves. The chapter also defines various types of strategies adopted in relation to the Internet (aggressive counter-attack, strong official presence, multiplication of Web pages by members, delegitimation, refusal). Using the concept of ‘cyberspace propaganda wars’, it attempts finally to identify some of the new battlegrounds.

INTRODUCTION

For missionary religious movements, the world of cyberspace may appear as offering unparalleled opportunities to spread their messages to far larger audiences than has ever been possible with more conventional means of communication. In juxtaposition to the hope, those movements have occasioned

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a fear that recruiting on the Internet would pose a great threat to innocent and unsuspecting persons.

This study explores what has already been learned about how the Internet is being used both by religious movements and their adversaries. Several questions are explored. We begin with the question of whether the Internet has proved to be a viable instrument for recruiting new members. The short answer to this question is that there is not much supporting evidence. On the other hand, there appears to be substantial evidence to support the proposition that the Internet has been used effectively by adversaries of controversial religious movements to shake the confidence of a fair number of current members. And it has provided critics with a relatively low-cost tool with potentially wide impact.

What is clear at this early date is that many new religious movements are locked in a conflict with those who would define them to the world in very different terms than they see themselves. The conflict is likely to continue for a protracted period, with little sign that there will be any abatement in the intensity of the struggle. Having explored the dynamics of this struggle to define the heart, soul and character of new religious movements to audiences of the Internet, we have concluded that the concept *cyberspace propaganda wars* is altogether appropriate. The work concludes with a discussion of some of the issues that are likely to emerge and give direction to the propaganda wars as they unfold in the future.

AMAZING GRACE ON-LINE: A LOOK AT THE EVIDENCE FOR CYBER CONVERSIONS

Scientific Pantheism (www.pantheism.net) is a cyber religion founded as an email group in March 1997. Paul Harrison, the founder of the group, claimed 645 members in forty-three countries by mid-1999. There are other examples of new religions either being formed, or bolstered by their presence on-line. What we don't know at this point is whether the Internet has really created or is capable of sustaining a *Virtual Community*. Further, can the Internet really be used to effectively recruit new members and, if so, what level of commitment is possible?

As the Internet became increasingly popular in the mid-1990s, some newspapers began to sound an alarm that it might become a channel for proselytization by a variety of new religious movements (NRMs; see *Der Spiegel*, 1995; Rosenthal, 1995; Wright, 1996). This feeling was substantially reinforced by the death of 39 members of Heaven's Gate in late March 1997.

On the face of things, it seemed to confirm the fears that this might be a dangerous trend. But more sober voices were also heard. Witness, for example, Joshua Quittner writing in the international edition of *Time*:

Spiritual predators? Give me a break. Better yet, go look at this stuff yourself and tell me if you think it's dangerous. A Web page that has the power to suck people – against their will – into a suicide cult? The whole idea would be laughable if 39 people weren't dead. If you want to find out what killed them, however, you're going to have to click a lot deeper than www.heavensgate.com. (Quittner, 1997).

In fact, Heaven's Gate had proselytized on the Internet, but had little more success than it experienced with other methods of recruiting over almost two decades. Apparently no more than two people were recruited (Perkins & Jackson, 1997, p. 65). One of these persons who died in the March 1997 collective suicide had come in touch with Heaven's Gate over the Internet and left her family in September 1996 in order to join the group, following electronic correspondence (Introvigne, 1997, p. 39).

One might expect that UFO believers, whose doctrinal world predisposes them to a high level of openness toward new technologies, would be comfortable with searching for knowledge on the Internet. But UFO aficionados clearly are not representative of the entire population of religious seekers. While some members of Heaven's Gate were very able technicians who developed Web pages commercially, they could hardly be judged as effective users of the Internet for the purpose of recruiting new followers. And the sample is too small for drawing conclusions about the potential of the Internet for recruitment.

There are several other data sources, albeit mostly anecdotal, that shed further light on the question of whether the Internet has been an effective instrument for recruiting to new religious movements.

Take, for example, The New Apostolic Church International that has been present on the Web since April 1997. The New Apostolic Church in Switzerland (some 38,000 members) has had its own Web page since January 1998. According to the Swiss statistics, the first year of operation brought an average of about 120 site visits daily. The page was accessed mainly for news and addresses of local branches. Email inquiries averaged about six per week. Over this 12-month period, two persons are reported to have become members of the New Apostolic Church following an initial contact made over the Internet (http://nak.ch/news99_1.html).

A survey conducted among several prominent critics of a variety of NRMs produced mixed comments about their experience with recruitment over the Internet. For example, persons working with the American Family Foundation (AFF) and with Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) confirmed that they had

been in touch with people “who were originally drawn in through contact with the group Web page” (D. Aguirre, personal communication, May 19, 1999).¹ Or, alternatively had left home to join with a group after contacts over the Internet (C. Giambalvo, personal communication, May 20, 1999).²

Other counselors replied that they had seen few cases. The director of Trancenet.org reported no contact with persons claiming to have been converted through the Internet. John Knapp wrote that he had heard of one case – a convert to the Unification Church (J. Knapp, personal communication, May 19, 1999). The director of the Peregrine Foundation wrote that there were ‘a few’ people who had become fellow travelers of a group in California (Morning Star Ranch/San Francisco Diggers movement) after discovering materials on the Internet (R. Sender, personal communication, May 18, 1999). Scholars who do field research with various religious movements have yet to report instances of persons who changed their beliefs and joined a new religion through the Internet. It may be that the widespread use of the Internet is just too recent to have recorded systematic observations.

Lorne Dawson has astutely observed that “studies of conversion . . . have found that recruitment to NRMs happens primarily through preexisting social networks and interpersonal bonds” (Dawson, 1998, p. 79). In a later paper with Hennebry, he affirms this point: “It is unlikely that [the Internet] has intrinsically changed the capacity of NRMs to recruit new members” (Dawson & Hennebry, 1999, p. 30).

NRMs, being missionary groups by definition, will quite naturally seek to use new means available to reach more people. However, unless the Internet would succeed in changing radically the ways human beings interact, the process of recruitment can be expected to continue to follow the same pattern. Consequently, we may presume that no more than a minor percentage of future converts will have a first introduction to their newly found beliefs over the Internet. Most of them will continue to be converted through other, ‘classical’ means.

Still, there are other aspects to consider. As Colin Campbell has noted in a seminal article, “cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general” (Campbell, 1972, pp. 121–122). Thus, we might anticipate that the Internet would act as a powerful tool, not as much for conversion to specific groups, as for spreading and mixing ideas that can then flourish in the ‘cultic milieu’. More attention should probably be given in the future to the potential role played by links on Web pages for promoting such a syncretism.

Another possibility to consider is the ease and quickness with which the Internet can move a user from one location to another. A religious seeker is

no longer confined to using social networking, community bulletin boards or newspaper ads to discover new and potentially interesting groups. By using search engines, and following the trail of links, a seeker can encounter many groups of possible interest in a very short time. But we know that the sheer and immediate availability of a nearly unlimited number of messages does not necessarily constitute an incentive to a commitment.

Today, seekers can initiate contacts without resorting to traditional means for learning about groups. And they can do so without even leaving home. For example, in 1998, a teenager living in a small city in Switzerland reported to me about schoolmates who were attempting to spread satanic ideas based upon American Satanist literature. When I asked how they gained access to those books – which cannot be found in Swiss bookshops (especially in a small city) – the teenager explained how they had got in touch with the Temple of Set over the Internet. These young people did not become members of the Temple of Set, but borrowed ideas that allowed them to articulate their chosen worldview much more elaborately than they could have without access to such sources of information. This example may better portend the use of the Internet in the future than the hypothesis that the groups will attract large numbers of recruits via the Internet. I will return to this idea later.

Any group that would attempt to recruit exclusively over the Internet would not likely be very successful. When looking at millenarian Web sites, for example, one fairly quickly arrives at the conclusion that there are probably quite a large number operated by lonely prophets, to whom the Internet may give the illusion that they are not just a voice preaching in the desert. Most of them are not getting very many visitors and remain virtual unknowns. But a few break through to a much larger audiences than they had been available to attract by conventional methods. Twenty years ago, we would have heard about few, if any of these prophets of doom. Public meetings are of no avail if they fail to attract an audience; printed material must be paid for and distributed; radio and television are expensive.

In contrast, the Internet is cheap and allows potentially unlimited access – even if the number of ‘hits’ on some Web sites indicates disappointing results. But a presence on the Internet may have a distorting effect even upon scholars, who might unconsciously come to feel that a message deserves notice because it is preached on a well-designed Web site. A good Web site, of course, may sometimes reflect the technical skills of its author rather than the content of the message or the effectiveness of the real outreach. Meanwhile, groups with hundreds of followers, but without a Web site, might remain virtually unnoticed.

For the first time in history, the Internet has the potential to allow a newly founded religion to go global from its very beginning. This, of course, does not imply that the founder will be making any converts. Still, we can anticipate that virtually every newly launched religious message will want to be on the Internet.

Even if a lonely prophet develops a handsome presence on the Internet, without ever gaining a convert, the psychological satisfaction derived from a virtual audience and the feeling of being able to reach the entire world should not be underestimated. There is probably no way to measure this, since empirical research on this subject would be extremely difficult. Still, there is good reason to suspect that cyber prophets, especially millenarian prophets, with a strong sense of imminence, may be desperate to attract attention. We know also that the desire to make the headlines has played a role in some violent outcomes (Introvigne & Mayer, 2000; Mayer, 1999). Although difficult to prove, it is not impossible that the outlet provided by the Internet may deflect the pressure felt by some minuscule groups to proclaim their message to the world.³ The Internet does not only affect the ability of an emergent religious movement to reach outsiders, but it may have an impact on the internal life of the movement as well.

EXPOSING THE DARK SIDE OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

NRMs are like almost every other kind of voluntary organization in several respects. First, joining is a voluntary decision – although like other organizations people may be pressured in varying degrees to join. Second, while many join, only a relatively small proportion of joiners stay long and become ‘totally’ involved to the point that membership radically transforms how they live their lives. Third, large proportions of all people who join terminate active affiliation after a relatively short time. Fourth, of those who do leave a small percentage leave with a profound sense of disillusionment and anger about their experience in the group.

For those disaffected followers, the Internet is a special interest because it provides a new and different structure to find one another and spread their message. Already before most new religious movements were even aware of the existence of the Internet, former members of numerous groups were becoming active on the World Wide Web.

The case of opponents of the Church of Scientology is well known to virtually everyone who has explored the presence of religious movements on the Internet in any detail at all. As a report on the controversies surrounding Scientology summarized a few years ago, “The Church has lawyers, the critics

have computers" (Grossman, 1995).⁴ But Scientology is by no means the only group that has been vigorously attacked on the Internet. Let's consider the case of a Sukyo Mahikari, a striking example of a group that appears to have been seriously affected by negative information on the Internet.

Sukyo Mahikari is a Japanese new religion founded by Kotamo Okada in 1959. It is not very well known in the United States, but it is actually active on all the continents and is estimated to have around 700,000 members worldwide (Introvigne, 1999, pp. 38–40). An examination of how it came under serious assault on the Internet is instructive of the dynamics of this process.

The major impulse for this assault came from a report by former Australian Mahikari member Gary Greenwood, *All the Emperor's Men* (1995, revised 1997). Only a few years earlier, Greenwood would likely have printed a few hundred copies of his report and sent them to people he knew and maybe to a few journalists. The impact of this work would have been minimal and it would almost certainly have remained unknown outside Australia.

With the advent of the Internet the book is now freely distributed on Web pages of former members, making it available around the world. Greenwood's report has been criticized for its depiction of Mahikari as a kind of 'yellow peril' (Introvigne, 1999, pp. 95–96). What matters here has nothing to do with its accuracy or lack of accuracy. The fact of interest is that it has made an impact and that the anti-Mahikari activities on the Internet have produced results.

For example, James Wilson is another Australian who used to have a pro-Mahikari Web site until he turned anti-Mahikari in May, 1999.⁵ He emphatically asserted that the Internet was a major factor in bringing adverse information to his attention. Interestingly, he had previously attempted to implement a strategy for countering critical pages against Mahikari:

I learned many tricks regarding search engine rankings solely in the pursuit of attempting to push down the negative pages in the rankings . . . At one time all the pages regarding Mahikari that were immediately accessible were positive, because of my effort. However, this is a massive effort which requires constant attention, and I stopped promoting any Mahikari page upon discovering Okada's [the founder] past. This allowed the negative pages to creep up in the rankings; meanwhile, more adverse information continued to come to light. Now, most of what is there is negative (J. Wilson, personal communication, May 20, 1999).

The full implications of the dynamic of the silent wars conducted on the Internet first became evident to me in 1998 as the result of a chance meeting on a morning commuter train in Switzerland with a member of Sukyo Mahikari whom I happened to know. As I turned our discussion to the Internet and mentioned the critical Australian page, my traveling companion replied that he was aware of the site and, further, volunteered that the critical material had shaken the beliefs of not a few members outside Australia.

This chance encounter set me to thinking more seriously about how negative materials about new religions on the Internet might impact different groups. Suppose someone becomes interested in Sukyo Mahikari, by whatever means and, feeling somewhat attracted by its practices and teachings, decides to search for more information on the Internet. Since more and more people are turning to the Internet for information, this seemed like a reasonable supposition.

To explore this natural curiosity that someone might have, I conducted a simple inquiry utilizing the Alta Vista search engine. The search produced a list of 458 entries.⁶ If a hypothetical person who was looking for information that would reinforce his interest in Mahikari had conducted this search, he would have been in for quite a surprise. Here is what I found:

- The first page contained a report from a critical Australian site regarding Mahikari beliefs about the tomb of Jesus in Japan (see Cornille, 1994): definitely teachings which are not usually shared with newcomers at Mahikari centers and would sound rather strange to somebody just acquainted with the movement.
- The second Web page appeared to be a Mahikari site. However, if the visitor had been at all familiar with the group and looked at the addresses, he wouldn't have found any of the Mahikari centers known to him. Further, the picture of the temple in Japan would not have been familiar. Sooner or later, the visitor would have realized mahikari.org is not a Web page of Sukyo Mahikari, but of its main rival, Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan, which owns the domain name mahikari.org!
- The next two Web pages, under the title 'Crumbling Foundations', would have led the Web-surfer again to the critical Australian site.
- The fifth link was to a critical Belgian site and the following entry to Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan in Japanese.
- The seventh link opened with a notice informing that the old site (a pro-Mahikari page) had been discontinued on May 14, 1999, and would be "modified to reflect its new purpose: a support group for ex-Mahikari members"!
- The next page was Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan again.
- The two following pages were finally Sukyo Mahikari ('unofficial home page'). One of them had only a list of addresses and the following notice: 'This page used to be a much better reference for Sukyo Mahikari than it is now . . . but the powers that be have decided that they don't want any reference to Sukyo Mahikari on the Internet'. This was in reference to the fact that Mahikari leaders had discouraged members from creating Web pages.

The author of this page couldn't resist the following: "I consider that to be silly." One has to wonder how long the author of this comment will remain a

member. The implication of his comment is certainly correct – discouraging members from developing pages does not mean that Mahikari will not be on the Internet; only that the content of the pages on the Internet will shift decidedly toward negative content.

Not until the third set of ten entries did my Alta Vista Web search find a happy Sukyo Mahikari member, but next to his page was another with the title ‘It Is a Mind Controlling Cult’, which was followed by ‘Sukyo Mahikari and Aum Shinrikyo’.

If a person who began this search predisposed to wanting to participate in Mahikari had pursued the Internet entries this far, one might be inclined to view him or her not so much a truth-seeker as an adventure-seeker!⁷

It is fascinating to read comments by former members, explaining how they could just no longer remain members of the organization after reading the information they found on the Internet. Thus was the case of Fabien Cheslet, from Belgium: “In September 1996, I discovered on Internet the book by Gary Greenwood.”⁸ Cheslet then became the Webmaster of one of the most active anti-Mahikari sites, distributing information in French as well as in English.⁹

Other groups have fared better. Transcendental Meditation (TM), produced no less than 6,565 Web pages with Alta Vista search. Only three negative pages appeared in the first 100 links, and they were all in the fourth quartile (rankings: 76, 81 and 83). Siddha Yoga was less successful, but not too bad. The first negative page was the 18th entry, a critical site named ‘Leaving Siddha Yoga’. Ananda Marga also came out quite well with the Alta Vista search, the first negative site appearing in rank 39 out of a total of 760 Web pages.

Among the considerable number of groups I searched, Seicho-No-Ie had one of the more felicitous outcomes on the Internet. Seicho-No-Ie is a Japanese new religion of the 1930s that adapted the New Thought teachings of Fenwicke Holmes (brother of Ernest S. Holmes who founded Religious Science). Of 340 entries, Seicho-No-Ie received no adverse mention among the first hundred. It is true that, at least in the Western world, ‘anti-cult’ literature rarely (if ever) even mentions Seicho-No-Ie, and the propaganda wars on the Internet seem to be rather an extension of controversies raging at the same time in other settings.

RESPONDING TO THE INTERNET WARRIORS

While this survey has by no means been exhaustive, it seems reasonably clear that small groups of ex-members have been able to create a Web presence that paints a very grim picture of the groups they attack. Again, I would emphasize that the issue that concerns us here is not whether the claims are true or

false. What concerns us here is the impact of that material on the groups that have been targeted for attack.

We turn next to an examination of how selected religious movements have responded to the negative propaganda of their adversaries. How seriously do they take this literature as a threat? What is the nature of the threat? What at some of the strategies they have developed to respond? While some groups engage in multiple strategies, five distinct strategies are identified: (1) aggressive counter-attack, (2) development of a strong official Web presence, (3) encourage members to create pages, (4) de-legitimate the Web as a source of information, and (5) ignore the Internet. Each of these approaches is illustrated with a discussion of how particular groups employ the strategy. Finally, we will also show how the harsh realities of the Web finally convince some reluctant groups to change their policy.

1. Aggressive Counter-Attack

Before its presence of the World Wide Web, Scientology was the target of Internet attacks on the newsgroup alt.religion.scientology, created on July 17, 1991. For a good many years it was not unusual for more than a thousand postings to appear on alt.religion.scientology in a single day. In a real sense, this news group was a pioneer spot for the development of nasty, in-your-face communication on the Internet. There continue to be many postings every day, and a useful weekly review summarizing the most important ones is available as well on several sites, allowing one to follow the development of controversies around the movement (www.xenu.net/archive/WIR).

Alt.religion.scientology became one of the most contentious and heavily trafficked news groups, in considerable measure because Scientologists logged on and attempted to defend their movement. But "there was apparently no coordinated action taken by the C[hurch] o[f] S[cientology] against its electronic critics until 1994" (Lippard & Jacobsen, 1995). This was the consequence of the posting of copyrighted Scientology material on the newsgroup. The first copyright suit was filed in February 1995. This led to heated debates which continue to this day. Opponents of Scientology claim that it is an issue of free speech (a very sensitive topic for Internet buffs), while Scientology replies that free speech cannot justify violations of copyrights and 'trade secrets'. One can follow on a number of Web pages about Scientology the various episodes of this ongoing conflict around the world (including police raids in several countries, following complaints by Scientology lawyers). It involves legal issues which certainly go beyond the specific case of Scientology, as the group itself is eager to mention.¹⁰

But the legal side is only one aspect of the controversies. Clearly aware that the members of a movement putting so much emphasis upon modernity and technology are unlikely to renounce scouting the Web, Scientology developed a strategy allowing it to acquire a massive presence on the Internet and at the same time making access to negative information less easy for its faithful. Scientology decided not to limit itself to the abundant material which it offers on official Web pages. In 1998, a Scientology official announced that every Scientologist would be encouraged to have a personal Web site (see Brown, 1998). Interestingly, there is a listing of all those pages, country by country, accessible from <http://on-line.scientology.org/splash.htm>. The movement has not been afraid to make the names and email addresses of thousands of its members around the world accessible in such a way, including in countries where the movement is quite controversial. The presentation of each page seems to follow the same pattern, insofar as one can ascertain through consulting a few dozen of them, which creates an impression of uniformity – although the human side of each Scientologist appears clearly in the section where he or she introduces himself or herself. A clear advantage of such a massive presence – Scientology claims to have “over fifteen thousand Scientologists” connected – is the flooding of the Web (especially search engines) with pro-Scientology pages.

Of course, there was a risk: some Scientologists going on the Internet might become avid readers of negative informations on the movement. But a counter-strategy has been implemented from the beginning of that operation and has become strongly decried by anti-Scientology critics: the starter kit provided to Scientologists for building their Web site (‘Scientology Web Kit’ CD-ROM) includes a filtering program, similar to censorware used by parents who desire to prevent children from accessing obscene material. Users sign a contract – made public on several anti-Scientology sites – by which they agree to use that filter program for surfing “without threat of accessing sites deemed to be using the Marks or Works in an unauthorized fashion or deemed to be improper or discreditable to the Scientology religion.” There is a rather long list of forbidden terms and sites, which actually makes more than just critical pages unaccessible to Scientologists using such a device.¹¹

In no other case seems the metaphor of a war as appropriate as with Scientology; on the one hand, a number of cyber guerillas around the world, either former members or people who are critical for some other reason; on the other hand, the massive presence of Scientology’s cyber army, not only the official Web pages, but also those thousands of personal pages all constructed along the same pattern, exactly like an army in uniform. There are leading figures or especially famous cyber warriors whose names soon become familiar to all those who follow the development of the controversies. At the same time,

Scientology's strategy on the Web cannot just be reduced to the type of "aggressive counter-attack," it obviously incorporates elements from some other strategic approaches which we will now examine. This observation is valid for a number of other groups as well.

2. *Develop Strong Official Home Page*

A good many religious movements have decided that a solid home page, accurately presenting themselves in an attractive manner, is preferable to attacking adversaries. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a good example of this strategy. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, has played a major role in developing the Mormon's strategy for the creation of an official Web site. In an interview in Lauramaerey Gold's *Mormons on the Internet*, Holland acknowledges that the LDS leadership was aware both of the opportunities for communication and of the presence of negative content about the church on the Internet. He describes the Church's position as 'cautious and measured' (Gold, 2000, p. 28). And cautious they were. In 1996 the Church put up a front page at www.lds.org that contained nothing but a piece of attractive art and the promise of a Web site to follow.

When the official homepage of the LDS finally came on-line it had two foci that reflected a strategy for communicating with: (1) the mass media, and (2) non-members, investigators and other inquiring persons who were interested in learning more about the Church. Notes Holland:

We were aware that there was a lot of inaccurate information being put out by others. We wanted to share our own story with inquiring people not of our faith who were interested in the Church.

This "reaching out to non-members" is abundantly apparent to anyone who explores the content of the page. As the official Mormon homepage has developed, it has expanded to include content that is more clearly intended for the use of members. Still, a large front-end segment devoted to family life can be viewed as a way of calling visitors' attention to the fact that Mormons are profoundly interested in the family.

What is clear throughout the content of the Web site is a focus on presentation of factual information, content that is likely to be of value to persons wishing to learn more about the Latter-day Saints. One does not find any counter-assault on the many anti-Mormon pages.

There are Web pages created by individuals that take on the adversaries of the Church. Much of this content may be appropriately described as 'contextualizing' a long history of anti-Mormon sentiment. For example, an essay from

the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* leads with a late nineteenth-century cartoon that depicts Mormons as a “despotic, ignorant, adulterous threat to society.”¹²

3. *In My Fathers' House are many Web pages*

Some religious movements seem clearly to have pursued a strategy of developing many pages. The Hare Krishna, for example, encouraged members to develop Web sites. Members responded by creating hundreds of beautifully designed Web pages. The purpose of this was to glorify Krishna, but clearly the anticipated impact of the presence of a large number of member generated pages was to diminish the impact of negative pages.

There appears to be a presumption of Gresham's Law in reverse, i.e., many ‘good’ Web pages will dilute the impact of negative pages when someone was looking for information about a group with a search engine. Whether this is, in fact, true is not clear. The creators of Web pages are constantly in search of insights that will help them push their own pages higher up on search engine lists. The managers of search engines, in turn, are continually looking for better schemes of organizing information that will increase their market share.

This said, when a religious group has a very large number of sites, or a number of very large sites, it would appear that they will at least improve their odds that persons searching the Web will land on a page that will present the group in a positive light.

Consider, for example, the case of the Mormons. When the first edition of Gold's *Mormons on the Internet* was released in late 1997 there were about 500 Mormon sites on the Internet. In the introduction to the second edition, released in early 2000, she notes there were more than 6000 sites (Gold, 2000, p. xix). A cursory examination of several searches did not suggest that the number of anti-Mormon sites had increased by the same ratio in just a little over two years, i.e., twelve-fold.

The Unification Church is unique in that it has approximately two dozen ‘official’ Web pages. Most of these pages contain very substantial content. This unusual number of official pages does not include the Web sites of many affiliated organizations. And, in addition, many church members have Web pages.

4. *De-legitimate the Web as a Source of Information*

The origins of Jehovah's Witness, like Mormons, date to the middle of the nineteenth century. Like Mormons, they have experienced a history of fairly high tension with the broader culture, and both groups remain targets of substantial attack. While the leadership of the Mormon Church has cautiously embraced

the Internet as yet another means, among others, for communicating the Gospel, the leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses is less certain that it is an appropriate tool for evangelization. As a result they have begrudgingly developed a Web presence and, simultaneously admonished members for creating Web pages. George Chryssides (1996) has accurately noted that while Jehovah's Witnesses are not enthusiastic about the Internet as an instrument for propagating their message, this is not because they are adverse to the use of modern technologies. Indeed, they did not hesitate to create radio programs and have even owned radio stations in earlier times. They argue, however, that "the Internet cannot serve as a substitute for the traditional door-to-door ministries."

This emphasis on person-to-person evangelism is reflected in the structure of their official Web site. Under Publications, some Jehovah's Witnesses pamphlets are available on-line, but the emphasis is upon encouraging personal contact. For example, click on a picture of *The Watchtower* or *Awake*, the two standard instruments for evangelization, and the reader is advised that copies may be obtained from the local Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. One is advised to check their local telephone book for an address or contact a branch office (by mail) for information.

If you want more information, the Web site provides a one-way structure for submitting your name, address, telephone number and the "best time to reach you." There is no space for comments or special instructions. Three pictures beside the address form leave little doubt about what one can expect if the form is submitted – two Witnesses will come and knock at the door. There is no email address or other structure for interactive communication. Jehovah's Witnesses have followed the lead of the LDS Church and provided on-line information for the media through a link to the authorized site of the Public Affairs Office. Here one can find telephone and fax numbers, and a contact address, but no email address.

Two things seem fairly evident here. First, the Jehovah's Witnesses do welcome the opportunity to reach out and evangelize. Second, they are firm in their resolve to do it their own way and on their own terms. Part of their cautiousness, including their reluctance to use email on the official Web site would seem to reflect their uncertainty about how to make appropriate use of the new technology without departing from classical patterns of sharing the faith. Consider the following comment in an article entitled "Use of the Internet – Be Alert to the Dangers!" which appeared *Our Kingdom Ministry* (November, 1999). The article does not condemn the Internet in itself, but cautions against indiscriminate use and offers up the alternative of time better spent:

Time spent in personal and familial Bible study, meeting attendance, and field ministry far outweighs time spent browsing the Internet, expecting to gain benefits . . . Are you not the

happiest when your life is filled with Kingdom pursuits rather than any other activity? [And further:] It is imperative that we stay close to our brothers in the congregation and use the remaining time wisely, thus making ourselves available for the advancing of the Kingdom interests.

One does not have to question the sincerity of the writer to recognize that there may be another rationale behind this counsel. The danger that members may come in touch with 'apostates' over the Internet is seen as a serious one. The risk of contact with 'apostates', knowingly or not, recurs several times, in different ways, throughout the article. This at least suggests that influence by anti-Jehovah's Witness propaganda is the main reason for the unease of the Society toward the Internet (see Penton, 1997, p. 335), even if other dangers (immorality, lack of discernment by young people) are evoked as well.

If the WatchTower Society has not officially banned the use of the Internet, there have been cases of Witnesses being disfellowshipped for 'imprudent use' of computers and the Internet. The impact of the article in *Our Kingdom Ministry* to many Witnesses was to lead them to the conclusion that they had no choice but to close down their Web sites or significantly edit the contents. The modest 'official' presence of the Jehovah's Witnesses on the Internet plus strong admonitions of caution to members about creating Web pages has left the Web free for many critical pages. This point was not missed in discussions on forums for Witnesses following the article in *Our Kingdom Ministry*, who were quick to point out the consequences of the closure of member pages:

... many good sites will disappear ... whereas the bad ones [will] flourish as never before, even rejoicing I suppose that the stage is theirs alone, albeit for the Society's official Web sites (<http://discussion.witnesses.net>).

And another Witness from Germany wrote: "During the next years the number of Internet users will increase dramatically and if a person is interested in our religion, he also will look on the Internet. Unfortunately he will find a lot of opposing views but only a few positive comments."

Watch Tower Society officials are not unaware of the fact that many persons have created highly critical Internet resources and that these resources may have the impact of disseminating 'distorted views' (M.R. Woernhard, personal communication, May 21, 1999). The Society has not been entirely inactive in trying to counter this threat. It has recently launched a nicely designed "Authorized Site of the Public Affairs Office of the Jehovah's Witnesses" (<http://jw-media.org>) in order to address issues often raised, like the question of blood, and it has also launched sites dealing with developments in Russia, Germany and France.¹³

In spite of their good intentions to create a positive picture of Jehovah's Witness on official Web pages, it is not clear that they fully understand the implications of

discouraging individual members from being on the Internet. Like every other religious movement, the growth of Internet resources is increasing exponentially. A recent check of using several different search engines indicates that the overwhelming proportion of information about Jehovah's Witnesses is highly critical. But they have a long experience with opposition. They may very well view the Internet as merely a continuation of those controversies under new forms.

5. Ignoring the Internet

If Jehovah's Witnesses have had, at best, modest impact in controlling the content of the Internet, there are several groups that have elected to have no Web presence at all. Theirs appears to be an even more difficult situation. Consider the case of The Way International.

The Way International was founded in 1942 by Victor Paul Wierwille as Vesper Chimes, a radio program, in Ohio. Wierwille took his message to the youth counter-culture in the 1960s and his movement became one of the more successful manifestations of the Jesus People phenomenon. Estimates of the group's size run as high as 100,000, but 30,000 is a more generally accepted figure.

The problem of leadership succession following the death of Wierwille in 1985 was tumultuous and the leadership of President Craig Martindale has continued to be a source of controversy. Almost from the death of Wierwille, various allegations have been rampant. The leadership has been charged with personal misconduct. There are continual accusations of brainwashing. And, for a while, there were rumors that the organization had the potential of violence.

The Internet has provided a significant forum for the spread of these claims, and in recent years, TWI has reportedly experienced a sharp decline in membership.¹⁴ As of this writing, The Way International has eschewed any presence on the World Wide Web.¹⁵ There are a few individual pages of persons who have been associated with, and offer praise to, founder Victor Paul Wierwille. None of these pages offers any information about the status of TWI.

There is no way of verifying the role of adverse publicity on the Internet by the organization's defectors, but the content of the Web pages of several adversaries is altogether unflattering. It is difficult to imagine that they have had no impact. It seems more plausible to suspect that adverse publicity on the Internet has contributed substantially to the problems of The Way.

The development of the Internet puts difficult questions indeed to groups that would prefer to remain out of the limelight. As much as The Way International might have preferred to remain low profile, they have not succeeded in doing so. The fact is that the only public information available is that which is found on the pages of apostates on the Internet.

Another fascinating case is provided by the Two-by-Two's, a group known to be quite secretive to the point of not providing any public address (see Parker, 1982). Of course, the Two-by-Two's, who do not want to publish information about their group, don't have a Web page. But former members do: one can visit the site of Veterans of Truth (VOT),¹⁶ RIS (<http://workersect.org>), or Telling the Truth (TTT; <http://home.earthlink.net/~truth>). According to the TTT Webmaster, Cherie Kropp, 'countless people' have contacted the three Web sites: people who had left the group years ago and felt guilty all those years; people who discovered the Internet information, questioned and left the group; members who were angry about the Web site (C. Kropp, personal communication, May 24, 1999).

The leadership is not unaware of what is going on the Internet: for instance, when a follower – who actually had not yet seen the material on the Internet – made his decision known to leave the group, someone asked him "if it was the stuff on the Internet." It was unfortunately not possible to ask the Two-by-Two's directly for their comments about the critical Web sites, but, according to well-informed Cherie Kropp, "the preachers are preaching about the evils of the Internet, which causes people to search and find the Internet sites" (C. Kropp, personal communication, May 24, 1999). Obviously, just warning against the Internet is doomed to be a losing fight in the long term. The leadership of the Two-by-Two's is said to "have used the Internet for some time," according to Kevin Daniel (RIS), who helps with maintaining the RIS critical Web site:

Eventually they may find ways to use it to recruit new members and/or to control members' approach to it so that they can use it to further the solidarity of existing members. Thus far, they have failed in doing either. Their approach to the Internet, as a source of outside information, reflects their attitude to other media (television is denigrated, and until relatively recently radio, newspapers, movies and even books were widely condemned as harmful) (K. Daniel, personal communication, May 26, 1999).

6. Transitions: When a Group Chooses to do an 'Outing'.

Since the Internet can become a real pressure upon some groups, it can also reasonably be assumed that it will contribute to changes inside them (not only regarding their policy about the Internet), as other kinds of external pressure do. Regarding the Two-by-Two's, according to Cherie Kropp, the Internet is already having an impact on the inner life of the group: "They are loosening up the requirements that the people object to the most" (C. Kropp, personal communication, May 24, 1999).

But for other groups, the change can become first a change of attitude toward the Internet itself. Such is the case of the followers of Guru Maharaji. The

youthful Guru Maharaji came to the United States in 1971 and established a considerable following for his organization, the Divine Light Mission. In the early 1980s the movement was reorganized as Elan Vital (still called Divine United Organization in India). For nearly two decades the organization remained active, but kept a low profile in the West.

The Internet changed this. In early 1997, a group of former devotees, describing themselves as “ex-followers of the ex-Lord of the Universe,” launched a quite attractive site (available in French beginning in May 1998).¹⁷ Elan Vital initially discouraged Web pages. But, having assessed the possibilities of the Internet, as well as the existence of adverse information, their policy changed in 1999. There are now several elegantly designed Web sites that offer significant information about Maharaji’s message, current activities and forthcoming gatherings (www.enjoyinglife.org), a chat room on the official Web site (www.premie.org), and the opportunity to purchase publications and videos (www.visions-intro.org). There is also a substantial Australian Web site (www.inspiration.org).

All of this represents a definite break with the former policy.¹⁸ Again, there is no empirical means to assess this change in policy. From a purely tactical viewpoint, Elan Vital would seem to have made the right decision. Without directly taking on their adversaries, they now offer clear alternatives to the critical information, developed by former members, which once had a virtual monopoly on the Internet. Whether or not it can be said that they are now winning the Internet propaganda wars, they are at least well armed for the battle.

JUBILEE: THE CYBER WARRIORS PERSPECTIVE

In assessing the impact of the Internet on new religious movements, this one thing is clear – they are all aware of the presence of their adversaries on-line. We have seen that their responses range from aggressive battle to effectively being immobilized – for whatever reasons – and doing nothing (or maybe pondering still how to react in an adequate way). Yet another important perspective in trying to assess the impact of the Internet propaganda wars is that that of the persons and groups who have utilized this medium to spread information with the intent of exposing particular religious groups.

The inescapable conclusion is that virtually all individuals who have utilized the Internet to spread their critical perspectives about ‘cults’ view the World Wide Web as a very positive development. Steven Hassan, one of the most visible ‘anti-cultists’ in the U.S., has been on the Internet since August 1995 (www.freedomofmind.com). Hassan does not hesitate to say that “the Internet is the single best thing to ever happen to fight destructive cults since I left the Moonies in 1976” (S.

Hassan, personal communication, May 18, 1999). He estimates he spends two or three hours every day answering email from people. "A great burden," Hassan says, but he believes he is "helping more people than ever."

Stephan Wolf, a key person in a network of former Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany, is quick to note that "[the] distribution of information has become less of a cost factor" – nothing comparable with the cost of printing and distributing printed information, the need to know addresses to which to send it, etc. (S.E. Wolf, personal communication, May 18, 1999). Danny Aguirre, a representative of Spiritual Counterfeits Projects, a group which was active long before the Internet became popular, comments also on the utility of the Internet. Changes due to the Internet, argues Aguirre, "have brought unbelievable convenience and efficiency" (D. Aguirre, personal communication, May 19, 1999). Ramon Sender believes the Internet is effective because "it is almost impossible for any group to shield themselves from this information stream . . . unless they cut themselves off completely" (R. Sender, personal communication, May 18, 1999).

Hassan also observes the usefulness of the Internet to bring resources to the relatives of a member of a controversial group. Carol Giambalvo makes the same point noting:

I am now able to direct families who are inquiring about specific groups to the group's own Web site so that they can begin to understand the beliefs/culture their family members have embraced so that they can keep lines of communication open. And I am able to direct the family to Web sites of former members to learn what their experiences were like (C. Giambalvo, personal communication, May 20, 1999).

Janja Lalicch counsels persons who are currently in or leaving a religious group. She believes "the Internet is a fabulous venue for open discourse . . . It can be a prod to get a person thinking critically and seeing that there are other points of view, which is what is needed to counteract the deception and cover-ups of some groups" (J. Lalicch, personal communication, May 20, 1999).

If the Internet has become a resource for augmenting personal counseling, as suggested by these comments above, it is also clear that quite a number of persons have posted documents of religious organizations on the Internet because they believe this information is intrinsically damaging to the group. Typically, these are 'secret documents' that are intended for official use, or only for the use of persons who have reached higher levels of preparedness.

The most celebrated case is the repeated posting of portions of 'sacred texts' of Scientology. In another instance, Sandra and Jerald Tanner, long-time critics of the Mormon Church (see Foster, 1984), posted a restricted LDS handbook of instructions dealing with church disciplining procedures on their Web site. Both organizations pursued the violators of their secret or restricted documents in courts and achieved at least some measure of success in having the

documents removed from the Internet. The fact that both organizations pursued legal action speaks to their perceived threat of the Internet as a repository for documents.

Additional anecdotal testimonies and examples could be offered, but the general level of enthusiasm exhibited by the persons cited here point to the conclusion that the Internet has been an enormously valuable resource for those critical of some movements. The two examples of groups which have responded so vigorously to the violation of copyrighted materials, sacred texts, or 'trade secrets', suggest that they too see the potential effectiveness of unbridled use of the Internet by their adversaries.

IDENTIFYING NEW BATTLEGROUND IN THE INTERNET PROPAGANDA WARS

This study has attempted to assess the impact of the Internet on contemporary religious movements. The great dividends that had been foreseen by some are not materializing quickly. There is little evidence to support the proposition that the Internet is a fertile crescent where recruiting and conversion is likely to be efficient. As systematic studies are pursued, it is possible that we will see patterns that suggest a multiple stage process by which new members are recruited.

At the same time, it would appear that one of the consequences of so much information about so many different religious groups is that potential recruits may be reluctant to 'sign on' to any faith. Recognizing there is still so much spiritual information yet to be explored, commitment may not be viewed as prudent. Alternatively, people may make only tentative commitments – gradually creating their own privatized faith. The Internet, thus, may provide the context for more rapid development of what Peter Berger calls 'privatized religion'.

Along with the uncertainty of benefits to be derived from the Internet, it is also clear that the large majority of new religions find themselves caught up in *propaganda wars* on the Internet.

We have explored some of the strategies that religious movements have employed to defend themselves against adversaries, but this inquiry has not explicitly examined the 'anti-cult' movement. Clearly that is a topic in its own right, deserving more careful examination. We have, instead, taken the adversarial relation as a given and focused on the dynamics of the process.

What we have learned provides a foundation for further reflections regarding how the Internet propaganda wars are likely to unfold. In this final section we

will seek to identify and briefly discuss some of the fault lines that we should pay attention to in the future.

Free access to the Internet

As the Internet develops, more and more segments of this vast communications structure will likely become taxed in the form of fees for access. While this may have some impact in shaping the character of the Internet, the underlying structure of free (or very inexpensive) access is not likely to change. The most important implication of this is the democratization of access to information. Not only will the whole world be able to access the Internet, regardless of class or other origins, those who create knowledge (or merely post information) will have the potential for very large global audiences.

It is instructive to compare the size of religious groups and examine the extensiveness and quality of their Web presence. The United Methodist Church, with approximately 10 million members in the U.S., has a creditable but uninspiring Internet presence. By contrast, the Unification Church has perhaps five thousand members in the U.S. and the quality and quantity of materials accessible from their Web pages (they have 25 official pages) dwarfs the Methodists. The Assemblies of God, a rapidly growing Pentecostal denomination with approximately two million members in the U.S., has effectively utilized radio and television as part of their growth strategy. The AG Web site, however, is no match for that of The Family, formerly and better known as the Children of God, with perhaps two thousand U.S. members.

These comparisons do not mean the Unification Church and The Family are about to make great leaps forward and become competitive with larger, established groups. It portends nothing other than the fact that the Internet can level the playing field in terms of potential access to potential adherents. Some established groups may well become pioneers in the utilization of the Internet for church growth, but cursory comparisons suggest smaller religious movements have taken the Internet more seriously and are positioning themselves to use it to achieve their goals and agendas.

This may change in the future. An increasing number of mainline Christians are becoming aware of the prospects of the Internet. As one of the lectures at the 4th Conference of the European Christian Internet Conference (ECIC; www.ecic.org) Network in Budapest in July 1999 noted: "There is no alternative than being also a church on the Internet." This may be a rather prophetic example of the kind of reflection that is currently occurring among mainline Churches about the implications of the Internet.

Freedom of Expression

The Internet currently is, and will likely remain, a forum of free inquiry that is without parallel in the history of free speech. This is a mixed blessing for new religious movements. On the one hand, their free speech is unlikely to be impinged. On the other hand, neither will be the voices of their adversaries.

Any group that expects to succeed will find it essential to develop an effective Web presence – not only to present itself, but also to neutralize or minimize the negative propaganda that will be present on the Internet from its adversaries.

This dilemma will not likely be solved at once but, rather, will be an ever-changing problem. As distasteful as this may seem to some groups, the propaganda wars will remain a part of the cost of doing business.

An article published in the newspaper *The Guardian* (October 27, 1997), strongly critical of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), and especially of its leader, Sangharakshita (Dennis Lingwood), led to controversies on the Internet, especially after the anonymous, 70 page *FWBO Files* were posted in May 1998.¹⁹ The FWBO called the allegations “silly,” but had no other choice than to reply,²⁰ due to the Internet echo of the document, while stating the dilemma: “to address these issues . . . is to allow our detractors to set the agenda” (Shukman, 1999, p. 67). There is little doubt that before the advent of the Internet, the echo of the article in the *Guardian* would have been more localized and the wide distribution of an anonymous document would have been nearly impossible, sparing the FWBO to have to come so intensely under scrutiny.

The Increasing Pressure Toward Transparency

Many religions shroud aspects of their beliefs and rituals in secrecy. New religious groups are not different in this respect. Indeed, new recruits may be attracted by the unusual, the esoteric, and by beliefs and rituals the general population would find questionable if not down right bizarre or illegal. In addition, every religion, old and new, has skeletons hidden in its closet.

With the Internet, what might formerly have been known only to a limited audience now becomes instant public knowledge – and globally. When ISKCON’s Harikesha Swami (Vishnupada) broke with the movement during the Summer of 1998, it was possible to follow the controversy (at least from one side) on Hare Krishna independent Web sites (www.vnn.org; www.chakra.org). Ten or fifteen years ago, it would have been much more difficult for outsiders to know about that before some time (not even mentioning

the details of the case), unless having some good connections inside the movement or monitoring very closely its activities.

But the problem is that virtually everyone can become a source. Rumors and allegations can spread virtually unchecked without any accountability for the source of the information. This has two implications. On the one hand, some groups will likely seek isolation and security to try and protect secrets. On the other hand, the transparency of group life may alter the shape and character of many new religions in ways that are scarcely imaginable. I do not have any firm hypotheses as to how transparency might change new religions; I merely offer the suggestion to encourage others to consider.

The Internet as Leverage for the Powerless and Oppressed

For those lonely former members who felt they had to confront and expose international movements they had left, the Internet provided them with an unprecedented venue for voicing their complaints and concerns. But there are also instances where the Internet might well become an instrument for positive propaganda for the promotion of a group. The case of Falun Gong in China unquestionably offers the best example to this point in the short life of the Internet.

Caught between the drive to modernize, and the desire to keep control of the Communist state structure, the PRC banned Falun Gong in China. Even before Falun Gong defied the government's prohibition against public gatherings and staged a large protest in Tiannamen Square, they had developed a substantial Internet communications structure. The Internet infrastructure, which has been used in China to announce the location of public meditations, was quickly able to mobilize for organizing protests, for exporting information abroad, for contacting journalists and otherwise mobilizing world sympathy.

Why the Chinese government viewed Falun Gong as such a threat is beyond the scope of this discussion. It should be noted, however, that the government's creation of an official Chinese site, available in English, for the purpose of "exposing the cult"²¹ speaks to the effectiveness of the Falun Gong Web presence. Barend Ter Haar, who regularly posts updates on Falun Gong on a University of Heidelberg site, notes that the government's site provides "a rewarding exercise in PRC propaganda and [for understanding] the increasingly sophisticated state use of the internet" (Ter Haar, 2000).

Beyond this observation, it is interesting to speculate about how the Internet may be utilized by social movement organizations both for the purpose of promoting organization goals, but also as a communication instrument times of crisis management. Imagine, for example, how the siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, might have had a different outcome if the Davidians

had: (1) a Web page, and (2) the technology to daily upload their story via wireless transmission? The possibilities offered by the Internet have already been well understood and used by some political groups, as the example of the Mexican Zapatistas and others has shown.

CONCLUSION

The challenges posed by the Internet do not only affect NRMs, but potentially all religious groups. The Internet is likely to contribute to the acceleration of globalization in the field of religious studies, making religious material even from little-known traditions available to the general public. It will also likely help diasporas to organize and keep in touch. The potential is amazing. Consider, for instance, how many Zoroastrian Web pages have been available for several years on the Internet, not for the purpose of proselytizing, since Zoroastrianism is not a missionary religion, but for reinforcing community links. Old and new religions alike may reap benefits or suffer damages from the Internet.

Traditional religious authorities can find themselves challenged by competing channels claiming authority in religious matters, and the same already begins to apply to NRMs, as some examples throughout this article have shown.

Religious scholars studying contemporary groups are aware how the Internet has already changed their lives in less than ten years, allowing them to network much more efficiently and to gain access to unprecedented amount of material. Religious groups are increasingly aware too that the rules are changing with the advent of new technologies. But nobody is as yet able to understand precisely how this will affect the future developments.

At a first and very practical level, there are legal issues involved. Disputes regarding the ownership of domain names have led to some picturesque skirmishes, with cyber pirates occupying a domain before a group had even realized the potential consequences. For instance, the German page for the word 'Mormons', www.mormonen.de, was actually bought as late as June 1997 by a critic of Mormonism. After having threatened to sue, the LDS Church finally gave up, but in the meantime LDS-related entities bought all the domain names in several countries which may in some way or another be associated with their religion, obviously in an effort to prevent the repetition of such cases. However, this was really a case on the border, since 'Mormons' has never been claimed as an official name by the LDS Church.

In most cases, developing jurisprudence on domain names leads one to think that, while there will certainly be a constant flow of new cases, the golden days of cybersquatting are behind. Despite the first-come first-served principle, it will become increasingly difficult to occupy a name in .com, .org or .net if it is

obviously intended to create confusion. The Jews for Jesus successfully sued the operator of the domain *jewsforjesus.org*, a Jewish opponent of the organization: the court deemed that the name was used in a deceptive way and the trademark deserved protection.

While abuse of domain names can be expected to become increasingly difficult, there are other dimensions of Internet wars which can be expected to continue, such as the posting of 'secret documents'. Court cases will probably be decided in most cases in favour of those legally holding the trademarks or copyrights. Such decisions are likely to be quite difficult in cases of religious schisms: it is one thing to decide about the legal ownership of a building, a quite different one to decide about the ownership of documents claimed to be 'sacred scriptures'. The spread of the Internet will probably make it possible for people wanting to post controversial material to do it for a short period from exotic places, with mirror sites in rapid succession. And who knows which possibilities future technical developments may still offer? The end of those cyber fights is certainly not in sight.

The sheer abundance of material and sites on the Internet will make it a more difficult task to retrieve some information with search engines. However, there will conceivably be improvements in the possibilities offered by search engines, in addition to those sites which offer information accessible in an organized way. Specialized portals for various topics are developing, and their quality will certainly grow too. They usually will want to offer a variety of viewpoints. This means that flooding the Web with a huge number of pages might finally be of little use: critical voices will still remain accessible.

NRMs themselves too may increasingly learn how to benefit from the Internet, which will allow people to study their messages even in countries where the political or religious climate may make it difficult for them to operate normally. But it will probably become ever more difficult to hide unpleasant facts in the history or life of a group, just as a change of geographical setting will no more allow a group to escape the attention and criticism of inquisitive opponents. There are certainly negative as well as positive aspects in those trends: some groups can be just defamed at a worldwide level without any real recourse if they do not want to fan the controversies. However, considering the increasing proliferation of available religious paths, the Internet might also become one of the tools contributing in fact to a regulation of the religious super-market.

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NOTES

1. Aguierre is Access Director for the Spiritual Counterfeits Project.
2. Carol Giambalvo is a thought reform consultant with the American Family Foundation.
3. Interestingly, some experts in the field of terrorism make a similar hypothesis regarding the possible effects of the Internet on the behavior of extreme political groups, according to a remark by Brian Jenkins, senior advisor to the President of RAND, in his keynote address at the conference *Terrorism and Beyond . . . The 21st Century*, Oklahoma City, April 17-19, 2000 (proceedings forthcoming).
4. I thank Prof. George Chrystides (University of Wolverhampton) for having provided a copy of this article.
5. Wilson was not an affiliate of Sukyo Mahikari, but of the main competing organization, Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan.
6. This exercise was conducted on May 19, 1999. The addresses of those pages are not provided in the footnotes, since some changed or disappeared in the meantime.
7. Another search conducted in November 1999 produced similar results. On April 27, 2000, however, there were 827 entries found; the first one was an unofficial, positive Mahikari Web page by an Australian follower who wanted to contribute to dispel adverse information found on the Internet. The presence of critical Web pages remained however massive.
8. See <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Flats/1374/fmbr.htm>
9. See http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Flats/1374/index_e.htm The Web page remains active, but is no longer updated since April 2000.
10. See a briefing provided to Jeffrey Hadden, The Church of Scientology and the Internet, June 30, 2000. Retrieved July 16, 2000, from the World Wide Web: http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/scientology_briefing.html
11. For more information about the way the filtering program operates (and installation instructions), see : <http://www.xenu.net/archive/events/censorship>
12. See http://www.mormons.org/response/general/Publications_EOM.htm
13. See <http://www.jw-russia.org/>, <<http://www.jehovaszeugen.de/>
<http://www.temoinsdejehovah.org>
14. See Waydale Document Archives, <http://www.waydale.com>
15. Rico Margnelli, head of the TWI Public Relations Department, advised Jeffrey K. Hadden on July 30, 1998 (telephone conversation) that they were developing a Web site. As of this writing, a through search found no evidence that a site has been launched.
16. See http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/2x2info_namelesshousesect/homepage.htm
17. See <http://www.ex-premie.org>, <http://www.ex-premie.org/french/index-fr.htm>
18. Even if the Terms under which this Web site is made available to you at maharaji.org still reflects some caution: "You may not copy, reproduce, imitate, alter, modify, publish, disseminate, distribute, transmit, transfer, create derivative works, post

on any computer, 'frame' or broadcast in any other media, or in any way exploit, any of the content of this Web site, including the Web site Materials." Retrieved from the World Wide Web: http://www.maharaji.org/notices/site_terms.htm

19. They can currently be found on the following Web sites:

http://www.bluelotus.com/fwbo/default_last.htm and <http://www.fwbo-files.com>

20. See <http://www.fwbo.org/criticisms.html>

21. See <http://ppflg.china.com.cn/indexE.html>

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